



Tibetan Migrants in Nepal: A Constructivist Approach of People to People Relations

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs a constructivist approach to migration, aiming to narrate the local constructions of Tibetan migrants in Nepal. While most studies on Tibetans in Nepal focus on political relations between governments, this study adopts a multidimensional perspective on people-to-people interactions. The research was conducted in three purposively selected Tibetan settlements of Jorpati, Kathmandu of Nepal. Scientific qualitative methods for primary data collection included in-depth interviews and focused group discussions. Despite Nepal's adherence to the One China policy in modern times, this paper argues that the livelihoods of Tibetan migrants in Nepal are shaped by local contexts. At the community level, there is little evidence of rivalry or contradiction. Instead, some community events are shared by both Nepalis and Tibetans, with some initiatives fostering new innovations and entrepreneurial activities. Consequently, the Tibetan issue in Nepal is contextualized within the framework of people-to-people relations, with local narratives strongly supporting this view.

Keywords: Constructivism, livelihood, migration, Nepal, Tibet

1. The Study Context

Tibetan studies are gaining increasing attention within social science research. This field generally encompasses notions of Tibetan identity, diaspora, migration, belief systems, Buddhism, language, and livelihood. Additionally, it considers the broader diaspora aspirations of Tibetans, not only within their original Himalayan and trans-Himalayan contexts but also in various countries worldwide where they maintain distinct livelihoods and cultural identities (Cohen, 1997; Javeed, 2012). In much of the Western literature, Tibetan studies are often categorized as a subset of refugee studies, primarily focusing on forced migration. As Black (2010) notes, there has been a significant increase in academic work on refugees and substantial institutional development in the field. Despite this, debates persist regarding the larger diaspora, diversity, externalities, and local contexts of migration, which are particularly relevant to Tibetans in Nepal and beyond. Moreover, this issue necessitates the identification and analysis of various socio-economic and political relationships between Tibetans, mainland China, and the rest of the world.

In Nepal, there are contrasting perspectives regarding the Tibetan community and their settlements across different regions of the country. These perspectives include Nepal's adherence to the One China policy, China's stance on its autonomous regions, Western liberal views on the Tibetans, and the perspectives of the Tibetan people themselves (see Acharya, 2019; Shrestha, 2015). Additionally, this issue is seen within the broader context of constructivism, focusing on people-to-people relations under the bilateral friendship between Nepal and China (Bhattarai & Khan, 2020). However, academic research on the settlement issues, mobility trends, acculturation, cross-cultural relations, and resettlement issues of Tibetans residing in various camps in Nepal is limited (Zhinong & Sapkota, 2020). Much of the existing research is politically influenced or funded by parties with hidden interests, which compromises the reliability and ethics of the findings. In response, this post-doctoral research aims to analyze the settlement status and livelihood behaviors of Tibetan communities by examining their migration history, existing entrepreneurship, scale of production, marketing strategies, challenges and opportunities, perceptions of guest-host relations, and the potential for third-party mediation.

Examining the history of Tibetan migration to Nepal reveals the longstanding relations between Nepal and Tibet. These relations, evident since the 5th century, encompass political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Despite experiencing two wars (in 1788-92 and 1855-56), the relations between the two territories have never been hostile or antagonistic, either at the state or community level. Historically, there were robust trade connections between Nepal (Kathmandu) and Tibet (Lhasa), which also linked the market of India (Kolkata). In more recent history, some Tibetans chose to leave Tibet voluntarily after 1959. Most of those who left sought refuge in India, with a smaller number entering Nepal (Leyava, 2023; Maura, 2003).

Although there is no official data, it is estimated that around 20,000 Tibetans live in Nepal. Most Tibetans initially resided in detention camps, which have since evolved into permanent settlements. These settlements were primarily established in the early to mid-1960s, with additional ones created in 1974 to accommodate the Khampa rebellions in Mustang (Shrestha, 2015; Basnyat, n.d.). Currently, there are twelve Tibetan settlement camps in Nepal, which are not under the direct control of the Nepalese government nor the jurisdiction of the Tibetan Autonomous Regional Government based in China. Instead, each camp is supervised by a representative administrator appointed under Article 72 of the so-called Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)

Charter. These camps were established through the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Government of Nepal, the Swiss Government, Services for Technical Cooperation Switzerland, and the Australian Refugees Committee (Jha, 1992; UNHCR, 2019).

The Tibetan issue in Nepal can be analyzed through various theoretical approaches, including realism, neorealism, rational choice theory, and constructionism. This paper specifically adopts a constructionist approach to international relations. It argues that the livelihood strategies of Tibetan migrants in Nepal are shaped by social and cultural constructs as well as economic motivations. Furthermore, these strategies are harmoniously negotiated and coexist with those of the Nepali host community.

2. Methods and Materials

This study undertakes an examination of the livelihoods and entrepreneurial endeavors among Tibetan migrants, focusing on Tibetan settlements in Nepal as the empirical context. Employing a blend of subjective and objective perspectives, it seeks to delve into the multifaceted realities experienced by Tibetan migrants within the local context. Rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which diverges from the positivist tradition, the study acknowledges the notion that realities are socially constructed within specific socio-cultural contexts, including the diverse livelihood strategies adopted by Tibetan migrants and their interactions with Nepalese host communities.

The research centered on the Choejor settlement in the Boudha/Jorpati area of Nepal, selected purposively as a case study. Drawing upon the methodological insights of Maxwell (2008) and Flick (2018), the study embraced a micro-subjective approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. A purposive sampling design was employed to ensure the representation of various livelihood and entrepreneurship-based activities within the settlement. Primary data collection involved conducting five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) within the settlement. Qualitative information gathered was subjected to narrative analysis, augmented by coding techniques, to extract meaningful insights.

3. Debates and Contestations

Recent literature highlights the implicit connection between livelihood and migration, underscoring their impact on the socio-economic conditions of individuals (Andersen & Collins, 2015; Scoones, 2013; Sen, 2011). The human capability approach emphasizes the functionality of resources over their mere availability as a fundamental component of sustainable livelihood. Sen (2000) posits that the expansion of capitals, in terms of livelihood, is central to development, allowing people to contribute through various forms of employment, production, household activities, and entrepreneurship. Contemporary livelihood studies have transcended the traditional scope of development intervention described by Chambers and Conway as 'sustainable livelihood' (Chambers & Conway, 1992). These studies now encompass multidisciplinary attributes, including sociological, anthropological, geographical, and political dimensions. Many scholars discuss these debates within the structural domain, and recent studies concur that livelihood construction depends on socio-cultural mobility, entrepreneurship development, and asset-based capability formation (De Haan, 2012).

In this context, an examination of the nexus between livelihood and Tibetans reveals several key insights. Firstly, the livelihood of newly settled refugees is influenced by various political, socio-economic, and psychological determinants, which are shaped by the social constructs of both the host and guest communities. Secondly, these determinants are culturally sensitive and economically fragile, impacting the livelihood construction among refugees. Additional factors such as age, generation gap, migration motives, living standards, legal issues, statelessness, and identity crises further complicate this construct. A universal model or framework for describing migrant's livelihood conditions is inadequate, as evidenced by the global debates pertinent to Tibetan livelihood studies in Nepal and their international diaspora.

Although Tibetan studies have been extensively conducted in Nepal (Zhinong & Sapkota, 2020), Nepali scholars are rarely engaged due to the subject's complex dynamics. Most studies adopt a religious or cultural perspective, with some ethnographic contributions. Notable examples include studies on Buddhism in Nepal (Singh, 2006), the construction of Tibetan culture (Korom, 1997), Tibetan diaries (Childs, 2004), and issues of excess women and non-marriage (Haddix & Gurung, 1999).

Political perspectives dominate the literature, focusing on human rights, sovereignty, and refugee studies. Representative examples include studies on the migratory dynamics of Tibetans in Nepal (Jha, 1995), international assistance for new settlers (Haddix & Gurung, 1999), and Tibetan nationalism and religious politics (Kolås, 1996). A few studies explore conceptual and theoretical perspectives on adaptation, diaspora studies, and ethnic identities, such as Houston & Wright's work on diasporic identities (2003) and Dorjee's research on cultural identity in Tibetan Diasporas (2005). In Nepalese context, however, Tibetan studies and migration studies rather than taking the notion of refugees studies. Legally and officially, Tibetans are not treated as refugees. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the historical, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions of Tibetan migration to Nepal and its implications. By framing the discourse in this manner, researchers can offer more comprehensive insights into the Tibetan community's experiences and challenges within Nepal.

On the other hand, research on livelihood and entrepreneurship among Tibetans is sparse. Shahi (2018) reveals that in settlements like Jawalakhel and Jorpati, the livelihood of Tibetans is increasingly distorted, with some lacking basic needs and legal documentation. Despite various strategies, questions remain about changes in livelihood strategies over time and perceptions of these changes. Critical questions include how livelihood is constructed concerning the market, scale of production, and external support, and the nature of the relationship between Tibetan migrants and the host Nepali community. This study aims to address these issues within this framework.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Historical Context and Migration Patterns

The arrival of Tibetans in Nepal began in the late 1950s and continued steadily over the following decades. The overall trend shows a decrease in migratory inflow from Tibet to Nepal since the 1980s. Four primary factors contribute to this decline:

Legal Challenges: Post-1989 Tibetan migrants face legal obstacles in obtaining refugee status. Before this, migrants could receive refugee cards issued by UNHCR, but this was later canceled at the request of the Nepalese government. Many refugees lack documentation, denying them legal rights to education and employment. Nepal is not a signatory to the UN Convention for Refugees. Additionally, Tibetans neither have Tibetan nor Nepalese citizenship but hold citizen cards from the CTA office in Dharamsala, India. This card does not confer legal rights in Nepal, such as access to governmental services or property ownership. A respondent from Bouddha, Kathmandu, illustrated this issue:

“Most of the Tibetans living here lack residential permits. They cannot open bank accounts or own property. Despite earning money, I cannot invest in permanent property in Nepal. My children will suffer from this problem, making livelihood and income generation insecure. I am sure that the CTA cannot handle this issue at all; but the Nepal Government should consider. I think government of China can support our documentation process as we cannot be outsiders for them” (*based on the personal conversation, 2022-Oct-7*).

Livelihood and Welfare Issues: Livelihood security, income generation, and social welfare for Tibetan settlers in Nepal face numerous challenges. Legal issues and lack of documentation exacerbate these problems. The lack of skilled human resources, limited educational opportunities, poor infrastructure in settlement camps, and restricted job markets hinder sustainable livelihoods. The migrants perceive such a critical voice that neither the government of Nepal, nor the Chinese government considers the welfare issues including livelihood security, empowerment, welfare, education, culture, and health services. These facilities are inadequately provided in the settlements. Even with some welfare strategies, legal support for reforms is insufficient.

Weakening of the so-called ‘Free Tibet Movement’: The decline in the ‘Free Tibet Movement’ demotivates Tibetan migration to Nepal. None of the settlements promote or participate in activities related to the movement for an independent Tibet. Despite international advocacy and funding for Tibetan refugees, the movement has weakened due to lack of support from the Nepali host community and the Nepalese government, which views such activities as illegal. High-security measures are in place to prevent demonstrations for any kinds of so-called free Tibet movements to maintain law and order as per the domestic laws of Government of Nepal.

China-Nepal Relations: Strengthening political and economic relations between China and Nepal discourage Tibetan migration. Nepal adheres to the ‘One-China Policy’ and recognizes the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of China. Security concerns and trade relations further solidify this stance. Nepal considers free Tibet movements or anti-China demonstrations as illegal, resulting in arrests and criminal charges. The rise of China as a global power exerts socio-psychological pressure on Tibetan youths in Nepal. A young Tibetan from Kathmandu expressed this sentiment:

“Let us forget Nepal for a while. Let’s see China. We cannot ignore contemporary China, which is rapidly advancing globally? It is a global power. Comparing Tibetan youths inside China to those outside, where do we stand now?” Of course, the growth of Tibet is due to the Chinese policy towards Tibet (*based on the personal conversation, 2022-Oct-5*).

The analysis reveals a complex interplay of legal, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors affecting Tibetan migration and livelihood in Nepal. These elements contribute to the declining trend of migration and underscore the challenges faced by Tibetan settlers in securing sustainable livelihoods and social welfare.

4.2 Analysis of Migration Causes among Tibetans in Nepal

The study identifies multiple factors driving Tibetan migration to Nepal, including political, cultural, and economic considerations. The majority of respondents perceive cultural reasons as the primary motive for their migration rather than the political and others. This suggests a strong attachment to Tibetan cultural and religious heritage, which often motivates individuals to seek a cultural homogeneity and Buddhist traditions in the destination places and establish settlements in Nepal.

The legal and cultural landscape for Tibetan migrants in Nepal has evolved, with governance now falling under the so-called Charter of Tibetans-in-Exile (1991), which established the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The Charter emphasizes the protection of Tibetan culture and the pursuit of economic opportunities for Tibetans but the local residents particularly new generation have different viewpoints about it. Interestingly, family-related causes and livelihood considerations emerge as less prominent factors influencing migration decisions. It’s noteworthy that many Tibetans recounted being very young and naive when their families made the decision to leave Tibet. Acting on their parents’ choices and the guidance of religious leaders, they unwittingly followed along. They lacked understanding of the reasons behind the move or its destination. For many, particularly older migrants, political and cultural factors overshadow economic concerns. However, among younger migrants born or raised in Nepal, livelihood issues gain prominence as they seek to establish careers in the Nepali market.

The narratives of migrants reveal the complexity of their migration experiences, with one respondent expressing uncertainty about the outcomes of migration and reflecting on the challenges of being stateless in Nepal. This underscores the existential dilemmas faced by Tibetan migrants, grappling with questions of identity, belonging, and the pursuit of a better future.

The study elucidates the multifaceted nature of Tibetan migration to Nepal, driven by a combination of political, cultural, and economic factors. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to address the needs and challenges faced by Tibetan migrants and foster their integration into Nepali society while preserving their cultural heritage and aspirations for a free Tibet.

4.3 Analysis of Guest-Host Relations in Tibetan Settlements

The study delves into the dynamic relationship between Tibetan migrants and the Nepali host community within the context of Tibetan settlements in Nepal. One key analytical question posed is the perception of adaptability and harmony between Tibetan migrants and the Nepali community, given the lack of recognition of their refugee status by the Nepali government.

Nepal is a home of diverse cultural groups, which includes ethnic communities that share physical resemblances with Tibetan people. Ethnic groups such as the Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Thakali, and Rai resemble Tibetan anthropometry. Moreover, Nepal's historical and cultural connection to Buddhism plays a significant role. Buddha was born in the Lumbini region (Rupandehi district) of Nepal, a fact supported by numerous historical and archaeological studies. Buddhism is highly respected in Nepal, and Buddhist followers are accorded due respect. Despite being a predominantly Hindu society, Nepal is religiously co-existent and multi-cultural, with Buddhism being the second-largest religion.

The findings reveal a nuanced picture of relations between the two communities. While the majority of Tibetan respondents report a non-antagonistic relationship with the Nepali host community, issues stemming from cultural exchanges and political identities are evident. Cultural celebrations, such as Buddha Purnima and Lhosar, serve as platforms for cultural respect and cooperation between the communities, particularly in Kathmandu. However, concerns arise regarding activities perceived as detrimental to the dignity and identity of the Tibetan community in Nepal, such as involvement in anti-China demonstrations and alleged illegal activities.

The politically shadowed identity of Tibetans, characterized by the lack of refugee status and identity cards, contributes to tensions and discrimination in livelihood strategies. Legal barriers, including restrictions on citizenship and banking systems, disproportionately affect Tibetans, hindering their entrepreneurial endeavors and demotivating livelihood pursuits. Interestingly, cultural bias does not emerge as a significant factor affecting Tibetan-Nepali relations. Religious affinity towards Buddhism and shared cultural similarities mitigate cultural biases, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Non-Tibetan perspectives further underscore the positive impact of Tibetan settlements on local communities, highlighting the contributions of Tibetan migrants to cultural diversity and economic development.

The analysis underscores the complexity of guest-host relations in Tibetan settlements in Nepal, influenced by a myriad of political, cultural, and economic factors. While cultural celebrations foster cooperation and respect between communities, tensions arise from political activities and legal disparities. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach, balancing the promotion of cultural diversity with efforts to mitigate discrimination and legal barriers, ultimately fostering inclusive and harmonious relations between Tibetan migrants and the Nepali host community.

4.4 Analysis of Migrant's Perspectives on Settlement Options

The section provides a comprehensive analysis of the diverse perspectives among Tibetan refugees regarding their preferred settlement options, highlighting the complex interplay of political, cultural, and socio-economic factors. The narrative contextualizes Nepal as a host to various refugee groups, including Tibetans, Bhutanese, and urban refugees from multiple countries. It distinguishes between the historical Tibetan settlement issue, spanning seven decades, and the relatively recent influx of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees in the early 1990s.

Desire for Repatriation to Tibet: A significant proportion of Tibetan respondents, particularly the elderly, express a deep-rooted longing to return to Tibet, driven by sentiments of cultural nostalgia and attachment to their hometown. They perceive Tibet as their true hometown and advocate for the preservation of Tibetan culture and identity under Chinese governance, citing efforts in cultural revival by the Chinese government.

Preference for Tibetan Identity in Nepal: A sizable minority of respondents, primarily youths born and raised in Nepal, advocate for the recognition of their Tibetan identity within Nepal's socio-political framework. Despite facing legal barriers to citizenship, they express gratitude towards Nepal for providing sanctuary during times of crisis and emphasize their cultural affinity with the birthplace of Lord Buddha.

Interest in Third-Country Resettlement: A smaller yet significant proportion of respondents express a desire to settle in more developed countries like Europe and America, citing concerns about their statelessness and aspirations for better human rights protection and career opportunities. This viewpoint is particularly prevalent among the younger generation, who draw parallels with the successful resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in third countries.

Concerns about Disintegration of Tibetan Identity: Some respondents express apprehension about the potential disintegration of Tibetan collectivity and identity in the event of third-country resettlement. They fear that dispersing Tibetans across different countries and cities would weaken their collective strength and dilute their cultural heritage.

Contradictory Views and Unsettled Questions: The discussion in the field highlights the diversity of opinions among Tibetan migrants, with some questioning the viability of Dharmashala after the Dalai Lama. The worldview expresses uncertainties about the future of so-called CTA amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics. Some also view Tibetan issues as a donor-driven agenda of Western countries that oppose the rise of China and do not want to see a harmonious trilateral relationship between Nepal, China, and India.

5. Conclusion

The Tibetan issue in Nepal necessitates a multidimensional perspective, acknowledging limitations within the macro framework of livelihood, beyond conventional government-to-government approaches in international relations, and outside of political paradigms that may overlook the unique challenges faced by Tibetans. It is locally narrated and constructed. Cultural relations and people-to-people interactions are regarded as significant components of international relations. These interactions have influenced and structured the social and cultural frameworks, as well as the economic motivations, of Tibetan migrants in Nepal. These migrants appear to coexist harmoniously with the host community in Nepal. At the micro level, however, addressing the following areas is crucial for enhancing livelihood opportunities and capability formation:

- Ensuring sustainable livelihoods and fostering the expansion of markets for quality products.
- Adopting inclusive and participatory approaches to development initiatives.
- Investing in education and skill development to nurture entrepreneurship among Tibetans.
- Improving public health infrastructure to cultivate a healthy and productive workforce.
- Bridging the generation gap in cultural learning and facilitating the transfer of indigenous knowledge across generations.
- Providing psychological counselling and motivational support to empower youth and facilitate their career advancement.
- Addressing specific gender-related issues, including equitable distribution of household labour, fair wages, and promoting women's entrepreneurship.

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