

Associational profusion and multiple belonging: diaspora Nepalis in the UK

By *David N. Gellner*

Oak Farm Community School in Farnborough is booked out every Saturday for months ahead, especially in summer. The same goes for other popular venues like Tamu Dhee house (a former church hall in Mytchett, bought for £0.5 million and refurbished) or the Cumberland Road Community Centre in Reading. Leading figures in the Nepali community sit on the executive committee or act as advisors to a dozen associations or more; on Saturdays and Sundays they rush from one meeting to another.

There are, so far as we could establish, very few non-joiners.¹ Almost every Nepali in the UK belongs to or attends the public events of at least some organisation or other. In an astonishingly short time – given that they only began to arrive in the UK as civilians in any number from 2004 – Nepalis have created over 400 organisations that exist in a state of continual movement and demonstrate impressive fundraising abilities.

There are religious organisations (Hindu, Buddhist, Kirant, Bon, and Christian). There are ethnic organisations (Gurung/Tamu, Magar, Tamang, Sherpa, Newar, Chhetri, Thakali, Limbu, Rai), with both central committees and branches in different parts of the UK. There are organisations based on a specific district, Village Development Committee (VDC), or cluster of villages back in Nepal. There are organisations based on a particular locality in the UK (Burnt Oak Nepali Community Organisation, Greater Rushmoor Nepali Community, etc.). There are associations (known as ‘numberi’ or ‘intake’) that bring together groups of Gurkha soldiers who were recruited and went through their basic training at the same

time. There are several competing ex-Gurkha associations, which campaign for Gurkha rights and support Gurkha welfare activities. There are literary, musical, sports, and youth-based associations. There are professional organisations (for doctors, nurses, caterers, engineers, businessmen, and media professionals). There are political associations (both linked to political parties in Nepal and issue-based). Attempting to unite all Nepalis there are various pan-Nepali organisations and charities (usually aiming at providing support for development work or education in Nepal). The UK branch of the Non-Resident Nepali Association aspires to speak for all Nepalis and to incorporate them into a global movement that can negotiate with the government of Nepal, particularly on the issue of dual nationality.

Most of these organisations hold at least a summer barbecue and an annual festival or general meeting. Many come together at the annual Nepali Mela (fair), organised by the Tamu Dhee UK, held in recent years at Kempton Race Course, where the numbers, activities, and sheer ebullience of the various parts of the Nepali community in the UK are displayed and performed for each other and for a wider UK audience (and then uploaded to Youtube).

The 2011 census recorded 60,202 Nepalis in England and Wales. After a detailed sample survey, the Centre for Nepal Studies UK estimated in 2008 that there were 72,173 Nepalis in the UK as a whole, the vast majority living in South East England. Community estimates, often repeated in the press, have ranged between 30,000 and 150,000. But regardless of numbers, for a newly arrived community there is an astonishing level of activity.

One of the little-known facts revealed by the BBC following the 2011 census was that Rushmoor (which includes Aldershot) – not a place one would immediately have associated with Buddhism – has the highest proportion of Buddhists in the UK, at 3.3 per cent. It is appropriate then that the Buddhist Community Centre UK, which brings to together Nepali Mahayana Buddhists and others, bought a disused telecom building in Aldershot and have remade it as a Tibetan Buddhist monastery (*gompa*) and community centre. The campaign for a centre included a visit by the Dalai Lama in 2012, when Aldershot Town Football Club was filled to capacity to welcome him.

It would be misleading to suggest that everything is rosy and



Members of the Limbu ethnic group, from far eastern Nepal, who are followers of the Satyahangma religious tradition, perform a Mangseva ritual in Coates Park, Swindon, 26 May 2012. ©David Gellner



Members of the Rai ethnic group, originally from eastern Nepal, dance as part of the Sakela festival (also known as Ubhauri), held in the grounds of Connaught School, Aldershot, 21 May 2011. ©David Gellner

friction-free in this communitarian garden. The desire for recognition sometimes leads to fierce competition in elections. Conflict cannot always be managed through the politics of consensus; the losing side, alleging malpractice, may secede and set up a rival organisation. Sometimes organisations that are claimed as ‘branches’ behave with what the ‘centre’ believes is insufficient deference. Accusations of embezzlement are commonplace, probably far more common than actual embezzlement itself. What remains truly impressive is the sheer number of people devoting their time and energy for communal ends without any financial reward.

The UK Nepali population is unusual when compared to other Nepali diaspora communities around the world in that it is dominated by the Gurkha connection. About two thirds of UK Nepalis are either ex-Gurkhas themselves or related to an ex-Gurkha. This means that those ethnic groups who were historically favoured for recruitment into the British Gurkha regiments (Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu)² are present in the UK in much greater proportions than elsewhere or in Nepal. Gurungs (also known as Tamu) are only 1.9 per cent of Nepal’s population, but are the biggest group in the UK with approximately 22 per cent. Limbus are 1.4 per cent in Nepal but 9.6 per cent in the UK. This gives a different flavour to politics; and in particular it changes the religious complexion of the community, because many Gurungs identify as Buddhist or as both Hindu and Buddhist. Thus, the overwhelming dominance of Hinduism characteristic of Nepal itself does not hold in the UK’s Nepali diaspora.

Even though Nepal is no longer the world’s only officially Hindu kingdom and declares itself a secular federal republic (at the time of writing a new constitution, under discussion since 2008, is yet to be agreed), nonetheless 81 per cent of the population is recorded as Hindu. This falls to 40–64 per cent in the UK, depending on whether or not multiple religious attachment is included. Just as many Nepalis are very happy to belong to multiple Nepali organisations, so many are also quite comfortable with practising several religious traditions at once.

Dr Chandra Laksamba, ex-Gurkha and Limbu by background, gave the following explanation in a video that was shown as part of an exhibition on the Nepali diaspora in Surrey Heath Museum in 2012:

Nepalese people do not strongly stick with one religion, they are always with at least two or three. I do believe and practise in three religions: Hindu; I go to the Pashupati temple in Kathmandu, a very famous Hindu temple, when I go to Nepal. I go to Swayambhu, and the birthplace of Lord Buddha, that is the Buddhist religion. And I do practise my Kirat religion. Even though I practise Hinduism and Buddhism in my day-to-day life, I have a small puja place [shrine] in my house. I have Hindu and Buddhist statues. On top of that, at the time of birth and death, death rituals mainly, when you do wedding ceremony or naming ceremony, we have to follow Kirat religion. Especially when we die, death ritual is based on Kirat religion. We don't use Hindu priests or Buddhist lamas. I practise, directly or indirectly, three religions. But we are not very hardcore fundamentalist type of thing. When I was in the army I used to go to church. We do celebrate Christmas as well, we Gorkhas [sic] celebrate all (laughs).

As this quotation, and the above discussion, both show, talk of a 'Nepalese community', with the implication that such a thing is either internally homogeneous or simple (whether considered from the point of view of ethnicity, religion, ritual, or anything else), is seriously misleading. □

Endnotes

1. 'We' refers to the team that undertook the 'Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora' project [AH/HO15876/1] funded by the AHRC-ESRC 'Religion and Society' programme, headed by Linda Woodhead. We are very grateful for their support. Apart from myself, Sondra Hausner, Bal Gopal Shrestha, and (from the Centre of Nepal Studies UK) Krishna Adhikari, Chandra Laksamba, and Rajubabu Shrestha contributed. A summary of the project can be found here: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2013_01/1358855418_Gellner_Phase_3_Large_Grant_BlockLW.pdf
2. This historic policy no longer holds and the MOD's official position is that recruitment today is ethnicity-blind.