

# Shifting Identities

Perceptions and Experiences of the  
Burmese Nepali Diaspora in Urban Chiang Mai, Thailand

Mrinalini Rai



Critical  
Perspectives  
on Regional  
Integration

11

Thailand  
in Transition

## Series Foreword

The monographs that comprise the Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series have emerged from dissertations based on original primary field research, and written as a major part of the requirements for the Master of Social Science (Development Studies) program of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

As Senior Editorial Adviser, I was engaged by the Center to conduct an overview of the dissertations—dating back to 2001 and now well over 100 pieces of work—and select which of them would best illustrate the quality of graduate student research. This was by no means an easy task, but it was decided to choose primarily those written in the past few years, given that empirical research in social science tends to date rapidly. Another consideration was that the monographs should give expression to the main theme of the series of Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration.

As the selection and editorial work proceeded it was then decided to organize the publications into sub-series focused on different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The first several volumes focus on Myanmar, covering such subjects as livelihood strategies, changing ethnic identities, borders and boundary-crossing, and the commoditization of culture within the context of ethnic tourism. Following volumes are devoted to Thailand, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The series also illustrates the concern to bring together social science and natural science knowledge in order to further the understanding of sustainable development issues. Over some 20 years Chiang Mai University has developed considerable research expertise in such fields as resource management, environmental impact assessment, upland agricultural systems and indigenous knowledge, health, and ethnic and gender relations. Teaching and research in development issues also deploys social science concepts within the development field to address decision-making, policy and practice, and the responses and adaptations of local populations.

This current monograph series also focuses on the processes of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental change among populations and territories undergoing rapid transformations within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

*Victor T. King*

Senior Editorial Adviser, Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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# Shifting Identities

## Perceptions and Experiences of the Burmese Nepali Diaspora in Urban Chiang Mai, Thailand

Mrinalini Rai

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This research studies the development of the Burmese-Nepali “Gorkhali” community in urban Chiang Mai, focusing on the cultural orientation they brought from both Burma and Nepal and which they have retained since migrating to Thailand. This aspect of the community reflects a diasporic identity that is reflected in the lives of the twice-migrant Nepalis. The interest and focus in this study is the cultural representation of Nepali identity that conceptually situates the Burmese-Nepali as a Nepali diaspora in Thailand. The research into the theory of diaspora and the lives of those who are part of one is still ongoing. In this research, Mrinalini Rai examines the narratives and perceptions of the Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai, in order to further develop the notion of diaspora. As a result, contributes to a greater understanding of the complex dynamics and processes that lead to migration, and in particular the dispersion of the Nepalis from Nepal.



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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: The Nepalis Abroad - The Burmese “Gorkhalis” in Urban Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand

“Marigold has blossomed everywhere with its golden hue  
How did this flower spread all over this foreign land?  
Seed of this beautiful flowers is ours,  
Let it not disappear in this foreign land.”

*(Rocky Thapa, Excerpt in English from  
the Nepali song titled, “Phulera Phulya  
Jhaka ra Maka”)*

Over the past 150 years, the scale of migration within Asia has been massive and expansive. This increase in migration flows has taken place amidst widespread political and economic transformations. Between 1850 and 1930, most of Asia was under the direct or indirect control of European empires, and this led to the movement of up to 30 million people from India to present-day Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaysia (Amrith, 2011). These decades saw a large number of South Asians, and particularly Indians, being transported to various colonial territories around the world, where they served mostly as indentured laborers (Clarke, Peach, and Vertovec, 1990). Another form of indentured labor migration was the recruitment of Nepali Gurkhas into the British military. The



nation state is a modern construction that became particularly salient in South Asia during the second half of the nineteenth century, more or less at the same time as it did so in many parts of Europe (Veer, 1995). In the closing decades of the twentieth century, many of the global migration flows that took place were voluntary, as inexpensive travel, open borders and economic equality between nations combined to make migration easier and more desirable than any other time in human history (King, 2007). This mobility is likely to increase in the coming decades, especially as borders are becoming more accessible and frontiers more lucrative in terms of trade.

Migration and displacement have played a significant role in creating a new human landscape, one that transcends political and territorial boundaries in the world today (Appadurai, 1996). There is now a significant number of Nepali communities located across many parts of South and Southeast Asia and beyond, and these are made up of Nepalis from different castes and ethnic backgrounds, and from different parts of Nepal. These people have each migrated for different reasons and with different kinds of resources available and have established themselves in different kinds of occupations. This displacement and movement has also made its way into Thailand, and one unique group I will study in this book is a small community of Nepalis living in urban Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. This Nepali community is exceptional, and one that I think has gone largely unnoticed, as it is made up of people who have migrated to Chiang Mai – not directly from Nepal, but from Burma – twice-migrants who refer to themselves as the “Burmese-Gorkhalis.”<sup>1</sup> The reasons for their migration have varied over the years; some have migrated in search of work, while others have looked to settle long-term, and some are refugees or displaced persons.

Thailand hosts the largest number of Burmese people living abroad and these people include ethnic refugees fleeing civil wars, exiled political dissidents, economic migrants and students (Egreteau, 2012). Thailand shares an

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1 For linguistic simplicity and without any political connotations, I have chosen to use the English adjectives ‘Burmese’ and ‘Burman’, instead of the terms ‘Myanmar’ or ‘Bama(r)’. Burmese then refers to the wider citizenship and common language of the people inhabiting Myanmar, while Burman more specifically designates the country’s dominant ethnic group. Myanmar is indeed also inhabited by non-Burman (yet Burmese) ethnic minorities, such as the Karen, Kachin and Shan, among others. Myanmar has been the official name of the country since 1989. In this paper, I will use Burma rather than Myanmar.

approximately 2,400 kilometer-long border with Burma, and has experienced large-scale migration from Burma over the past few decades (Yasuda, 2008). According to the Thai Office of Foreign Workers, as of March 2013 there were 784,033 workers from Myanmar registered for work in Thailand, with a further 327,508 waiting for their documents. NGOs also estimate that there are a further two million who remain undocumented (Pollock, 2013). In Chiang Mai, the official registration figure as of March 2013 stood at 65,119; a figure, which includes a number of ethnic groups from Burma, such as the Mon, Karen and Shan people (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013). However, there is no separate category for the Burmese-Nepalis in the Thai official statistics, let alone in Chiang Mai. The Burmese-Nepali community in Chiang Mai is almost invisible, mainly because it has been assimilated within the larger Burmese migrant population. There is no statistical data for, or evidence of, the number of Burmese-Nepalis in Thailand, who include both documented and undocumented migrants, long-term settlers, as well as some with refugee status.

This book pays particular attention to this community of Burmese-Nepalis – the members of which have traveled along various routes from Nepal to India, and then on to Burma, to where many traveled alongside the colonial British as soldiers, traders and laborers. In recent decades, a proportion of the population has made its way from Burma to its neighbor, Thailand. No research has evaluated the size of the Nepali population living abroad, let alone the Burmese-Nepalis, either in Burma, Thailand or in other parts of Asia. The data that exist is scarce and unreliable, if not contradictory. As a result, for this study I have used a number of sources to collect information (based on academic papers, credible media reports, interviews among the community, NGO information and my own fieldwork) to help my study of the Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai, knowing that this community also exists in other parts of Thailand. Many of the Burmese-Nepalis are second generation Nepali who were born in Burma, but have maintained some of the cultural practices that identify their roots as being from Nepal. They are twice-migrants. I use the term ‘twice-migrants’ to identify and trace the migrations of the Nepalis, which have taken place over two locations: Burma and now Thailand, as well as their ancestral roots in Nepal.

The Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai have been making their way to Thailand for a few decades now, and their journeys have occurred for various reasons – whether economic, cultural and/or political, and are similar to the

reasons that have driven the Burmese out of Burma and to other parts of the world, including Thailand. The routes taken by the Burmese-Nepalis can be traced back to areas along the Thai-Burma border, from where many have found their way to Bangkok, Kanchanaburi and to the southern tourist destinations of Phuket, Hua Hin, Pattaya, Ko Samui, Ko Chang and others in Thailand. Some have decided to make a home for themselves in Chiang Mai, the capital of Chiang Mai Province in Northern Thailand. This community of Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai is comparatively small and largely lives around the Chang Klan area - to the east of the old city and near to the Night Bazaar area, which is the city's tourist hub. Around the Night Bazaar, a sizeable number of Burmese migrants live and work doing various jobs, with the majority of Burmese-Nepalis working in tailors, restaurants and in other shops that cater to tourists. Many women from the community also work as domestic help in the homes of Thai-Indians and other Burmese-Nepalis. In terms of religion, they practice Hinduism and Buddhism, and with respect to language; in addition to Burmese, some also speak other languages depending on their home locations in Burma (such as Hindi, Karen, Shan and others).

## **The Beginning of the Study**

My first sojourn to Thailand took place in October 2007, when I started a job in Chiang Mai, which allowed me the opportunity to explore the issues facing indigenous peoples in Asia. My aim was to gather knowledge and learn about issues surrounding the diversity of communities present in the region and their rights.

When I first arrived in Chiang Mai I tried to locate some Nepalis with whom I could meet, but there seemed to be very few and as Chiang Mai is a transient place for foreign nationals, I could not maintain any firm connections. However, over time I did meet some Nepalis with whom I met occasionally during festivities, and they were Nepalis from Burma in Chiang Mai. I then began interacting with this small community of Burmese-Nepalis from time to time, through whom I could re-live my Nepali identity through the various celebrations taking place throughout the year, either at temple or in people's homes. I had some interesting conversations with them; we would converse in Nepali and there was a certain amount of familiarity and comfort that we both experienced when communicating with each other. In addition, it was very

interesting for me to see the close affection they expressed for a place that many of them had never visited – Nepal. The Burmese-Nepalis see Nepal as the country of their ancestors – a land that their forefathers talked about. Their place of origin. They see Nepal as the place where they have their roots. At the same time, they also have an affection for Burma. As many of the Burmese-Nepalis were born in Burma, they have a deep-rooted sense of comfort and reassurance for the country, and have close connections with it, as the place that nurtured them and where they still have family. In some senses, Burma is their home away-from-home, and many of the community members who were born in Burma and have never been to Nepal identify themselves as Burmese, although they have a Nepali cultural orientation.

This dichotomy between their land of origin and the land in which they have settled is quite marked among the Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai, as they have then made their way on to Thailand. Most of the people I spoke to seem to identify themselves as Nepali, but many have lost their connections with Nepal. The majority of them have their families and lives back in Burma, and some would even like to return there. For them, returning to Nepal is just an event in their imagination – a journey in the mind, or maybe a visit. To return permanently would be a journey filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. In the present context, this journey would be even more complicated as the community has made a home in Thailand. Many members of my study population of Burmese-Nepalis living in Chiang Mai have been in Chiang Mai for over two decades, and have never been back to Burma, while other, more recent migrants, travel back and forth to Burma and still maintain close connections with and send remittances back to their families there. In Burma, the Nepalis (or as they are also called *Gorkhali*), have become part of the ethnic tapestry inside Burma and through all the historical and religious turmoil that has taken place there, have become intertwined with the country. In general, in Burma there is a degree of xenophobia towards *kala*<sup>2</sup>, a classification in which in early-nineteenth-century Burma roughly meant an ‘overseas person’, a person from South Asia, West Asia or Europe and probably insular South-east Asia as

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2 Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Myanmar nationalist movement had strong undertones of communal tension. Even today, people of South Asian origin are often looked down on in Myanmar, popularly referred to as *kala* a Burmese language pejorative meaning “foreigner” or “Indian.” Curiously, Caucasians are still called *kala pyu*, which translates from Burmese to “white Indians” (Litner, 2007).



well (Myint-U, 2001, p. 89). Though facing similar discrimination, the Burmese-Nepalis seemed to live in harmony with a number of communities there. This could be due to the fact that, like the majority of the Burmese, Nepalis also practice Buddhism. However, this does not take away from the fact that many lack good education and good job opportunities in Burma. It is very interesting to note that, on the one hand this community identifies itself as Nepali but it is reluctant to return to Nepal, as its members fear being rejected and discriminated against; and on the other also faces discrimination and a number of challenges inside Burma. To them, however, to return to Burma seems less threatening than the prospect of returning to Nepal. In the meantime though, this diaspora is establishing itself in Chiang Mai and so it is the right time to acknowledge and take notice of this.

Thailand has a large population of Nepalis, although this is little known to the general public, as many of them come from Burma. The exact number of Nepalis in Thailand is unknown and many struggle to gain citizenship in the country or are they recognized by the state. This Burmese-Nepali way-of-life is still reflected in the Nepali food they eat and the important cultural rituals and festivals they follow according to the Nepali calendar.

Within these complex scenarios, my study looks at the interactions taking place within a small community of Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai. For me, it was intriguing and fascinating to witness the efforts of this community to try and keep its identity as Nepali both vibrant and alive - through the cultural and religious activities that take place in urban Chiang Mai. By interacting with this community, I tried to scope out the Nepali aspect and practices of this community, and at the same time be conscious not to leave out the Burmese portion of their Burmese-Nepalis identity. Of what I see, the Nepali aspect tends to be prominent among this population of twice-migrants; yet, they certainly speak Burmese, eat Burmese food and have adapted to certain cultural practices. This book does not seek to mold them into a set identity and create divisions, but rather to understand the concept of diaspora in the context of the Burmese-Nepalis.

Further, I did not come to any rigid conclusions in advance, but rather created a space for more exploration and study to take place, in order to understand the Burmese-Nepalis community in more depth, as people who have migrated twice to be where they are now. In this book I hope to shed light

on the dynamic ways in which the people within my study community have maintained their affiliations and customs by holding on to their individual, local, national and transnational level identities. At the same time, I explore the unbounded social space that exists among the Burmese-Nepalis within the context of urban Chiang Mai.

## Contextual Background

### *Who are the Burmese-Gorkhalis?*

In general, the Nepalis in Burma, or from Burma, are referred to as Burmese “*Gorkha*” or “*Gorkhali*”, a term derived from the recruitment of “*Gorkha*” soldiers into the British Army; one still associated with people who are brave, honest and, most importantly, loyal. First published in 1928, *The Gurkhas, Their Manners, Customs and Country* paints a vivid picture of the valor and bravery of the Gurkhas during the war that the East India Company declared against Nepal in 1814. These words written by W. Brook Northey illustrate the point:

Account in Nalapani, situated on a hill 500 to 600 feet high and five miles from Dehra Dun.....Here, Balbhadra, the Gurkha commander, whose force consisted of 600 men, largely composed, it is said, of soldiers of the Purana Gorkha, a regiment composed entirely of Magars<sup>3</sup>, resisted two attacks of General Gillespie’s division. Three days’ incessant shelling, however, compelled the eventual withdrawal of the heroic garrison, and the survivors, ninety in number, escaped through the British lines, but not before the British commander had been killed and 31 officers and 750 men killed and wounded.

For the British disaster now followed disaster, and again in February 1815 a force of 2,000 irregulars under Lieutenant

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3 Magars are an ethnic group indigenous to Nepal, whose homeland extends from the western and southern edges of the Dhaulagiri section of the Himalayas range, south to the Mahabharat foothills and eastward to the Gandaki basin. The Magars can be divided into seven major groups: the Pun, Rana, Thapa, Ale, Budhathoki, Roka and Gharti. Magar clans intermarry with one another.

Young suffered defeat at the hands of 200 Gurkhas, who were commanded by Ranjit Singh. (Northey, 2001, p. 46-47)



**Figure 1.1: Balbhadra Kunwar: The Nepali Commander of the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816).** *Following the war, he became very famous. He was a captain in the Royal Nepali Army (Gorkhali Army) and gained fame as the commander of the Gorkhali force at the Battle of Nalapani, outside of Dehra Dun (before Nepal was formed - located in India) in 1814 during the Anglo-Nepalese War (Source: Wikipedia).*

Even since the colonial period, the terms *gorkha* and *gorkhali* have been used to characterize the Nepalis as a whole, mainly due to those who are recruited into the military, either in India or in Britain. The members of the families left behind by such recruits have adopted this terminology to identify themselves, and similar to the case of the Burmese-Gorkhali in Chiang Mai, identify themselves as *Gorkhali* from Nepal; those who have lived in Burma for a number of decades.

The Burmese-Gorkhalis in Chiang Mai vary widely in terms of their occupations, expectations, statuses and, not least, their relationships with Nepal as their country of origin and ancestral home. However, having migrated from Burma to neighboring Thailand, many are scattered across different locations.

Chiang Mai has one such community, and the majority of its members can speak conversational Nepali. They have regular interactions with their relatives back in Burma, and take an active interest in events in both Burma and Nepal. There is no accurate data on the Burmese-Nepalis in Thailand, but in the 1901 Burmese census, about 10% of the population in Myitkyina District, Kachin State was composed of so-called “others”, a term encompassing to a large extent pensioned-off Gurkha soldiers who had settled in the area (Lowis, 1902). In Burma, they are spread across various locations; some in rural areas and others in urban centers, while many are also centered in conflict areas, such as Kachin and Shan states.

In this research study, and to contextualize the Burmese-Gorkhali community in Chiang Mai, I decided to refer to the study community as Burmese-Nepalis. I did this in order to place them within the larger context of the Nepali diaspora, and also, to be able to engage with them when trying to understand their everyday practices. In Chapter 3 of this book, I will attempt to decipher one aspect of their migration to Thailand, and will describe in detail the Burmese-Nepali ethnoscape in Chiang Mai, plus look at some of their practices; those reflected in their everyday lives, and which are becoming more visible as part of their process of creating a distinct identity for themselves.

## Research Questions

What is central to this study is to probe whether such processes of identity building and construction among the Burmese-Nepali situates them as a Nepali diaspora. The answer to this may be ‘not’ in the true sense of the word, but I will contest that, in this new age of globalization during which the movement of peoples is increasing and inevitable, it might still be the case. Following my own curiosity and initial inquiries, as mentioned above, I decided to investigate and answer the following key research questions:

1. How do the Burmese-Nepalis in Chiang Mai “imagine” themselves and their community in the context of making connections with their homes and homeland in Burma and Nepal?
2. In what symbolic ways has this community built and used the perception of ‘Nepali-ness’ in order to fit within the larger Nepali community context that exists in Thailand, and; how does it interact with the host community economically, socially and culturally?



3. How do the everyday social and cultural connections, those constructed through various daily performances, help create a social space for the Burmese-Nepalis, in Chiang Mai and beyond?

## Research Objectives

1. To examine and understand the migration and settlement experiences of a community of Burmese-Nepali in urban Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand.
2. To observe and investigate the practices that this community performs to re-construct its cultural identity and/or cultural citizenship during its members every day, lived experiences as Nepali.
3. To examine and analyze the collective image surrounding 'being Nepali' among the Burmese-Nepalis, one that is flexible and negotiated within the social and political contexts they face.

## Overview of the Study

The population estimates for Burmese-Nepali Gurkhas in Burma vary a lot. According to the Embassy of Nepal in Burma, Burmese of Nepali origins are estimated to be over 200,000, while other sources say between 100,000<sup>4</sup> and 500,000 (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013). Significant populations can be found in Yangon, Mandalay Division, Shan State and Kachin State, and all can communicate in Burmese, though the language they use the most is Nepali or *Gurkhali* (referred to as *khas kura*, a form of Nepali). The Burmese-Nepali group in Chiang Mai consists of numerous groups with diverse ethnic backgrounds and who come from different parts of Burma. Due to the ambiguity of the name Gurkha to the migrant Nepali community from Burma, and because of the emphasis they place on being thought of as Nepali, I will mainly use the term "Burmese-Nepali" here, in place of "Burmese Gorkhali." I acknowledge that the term "Burmese-Nepali" might be a contested term, and that the group is not a homogenous entity, so I loosely use it to refer to the small population of Burmese people who have migrated from Burma to Thailand and who have ancestral linkages to Nepal. I do not intend to fix this

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4 Burmese-Nepali respondent in Chiang Mai in a discussion with the author (November 2011).