

From Kathmandu to Kent: Nepalis in the UK

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Diversity, activism and religion in a new diasporic community.

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Nepali Mela UK 2014, Kempton Park Racecourse. (Image: Premila van Ommen)

Nepalis in Britain are one of the UK's most recent diaspora populations, younger and less visible than more established and better-known minorities from Southasia such as Pakistanis (approximately 1.2 million), Bangladeshis (around 450,000), Indians (1.4 million – whether from East Africa or India), or Sri Lankans (estimates up to 500,000). The UK's 2001 census recorded a mere 5943 people who had been born in Nepal. But beginning in 2004, Nepalis started to arrive in greater numbers and, for the next few years, they were one of the fastest-growing groups in the UK. Nepali restaurants began to appear in many British towns. Usually named after some variation on 'Gurkha' or 'Everest', they are decorated with posters of Swayambhu, Mount Machhapuchhre, or the living goddess Kumari, and tend to serve the long-established version of north Indian food adapted for British palates (usually served in 'Indian' restaurants run by Bangladeshis). As a nod to Nepaliness, the menu usually lists among its starters *momos* and *cholyala* (made from mutton or chicken, buffalo meat not being easily available – though it has started to be sold in areas with high Nepali population).

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 southeast England. Community estimates, often repeated in the press, have ranged between 30,000 and 150,000.

Proliferation of associations

Whatever the true figure, for a newly arrived community, the Nepali diaspora is involved in an astonishing level of activity with a dizzying array of social groups formed on a variety of different bases. In a surprisingly short time, Nepalis in the UK have created over 400 organisations that exist in a state of continual movement, mutual networking and reciprocal support (and occasional conflict). The groups inevitably have links with Nepal, but how close and intense these are depends very much on the personalities involved. Undoubtedly, these connections have been

facilitated by social media in recent years. Some UK-based groups raise considerable amounts of money for charity or investment in Nepal. Other associations are primarily concerned with activity in the UK.

There are religious organisations (Hindu, Buddhist, Kirant, Bon and Christian); ethnic organisations (Gurung/Tamu, Magar, Tamang, Sherpa, Newar, Chhetri, Thakali, Limbu and Rai) with both central committees and branches in different parts of the UK; organisations based on a specific district, VDC (Village Development Committee), or cluster of villages back in Nepal; and organisations related to a particular locality in the UK (Burnt Oak Nepalese Community, Greater Rushmoor Nepali Community, etc). A number of Gurkha organisations have also been formed: *numberi* or 'intake' associations, bringing together groups of Gurkha soldiers who were recruited and went through their basic training at the same time; and several competing ex-Gurkha associations, which campaign for Gurkha rights and support Gurkha welfare activities. Further, there are literary, musical, sports and youth associations; professional organisations (for doctors, nurses, caterers, engineers, business people and media professionals); and political associations (both, issue-based and those linked to political parties in Nepal). There are also various pan-Nepali organisations and charities that attempt to unite all Nepalis, usually aiming to provide support for development work or education in Nepal. And 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 citizenship.

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Almost every Nepali in the UK belongs to or attends the public events of at least one of these organisations as research carried out as part of the project 'Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora' (AHRC-ESRC 'Religion and Society' programme) revealed. Some of these associations are large enough that there are elections every three years for a new team to run the organisation. In others, it is a question of persuading respected and active figures to take on the task of running it. Leading figures of the 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.

Most of the organisations hold at least a summer barbecue and an annual festival or general meeting. Popular venues, such as Oak Farm Community School in Farnborough, Tamudhee Hall in Mytchett (a former church hall, bought for GBP 500,000 and refurbished) or The Warehouse Community Centre in Reading are booked out every Saturday months in advance, especially in summer. During the annual Nepali Mela, organised by the Tamu Dhee UK, where many groups come together and their numbers and activities – the sheer ebullience of the various parts of the Nepali community – are displayed for each other and for a wider UK audience at the Kempton Park Racecourse near London.

The Kirat Rai Yayokkha UK, to take one example, brings together all Rais from across the country to celebrate the Sakela-Ubhauli festival on a Saturday in May. Food and drinks stalls are set up in a large school playground. There is also that most English of institutions, an ice-cream van. Hundreds of people arrive by coach and by car. At the centre is a small shrine to Yalambar, cultural hero of the Rais as well as of Limbus and Sunuwars, with fruit and flower offerings in front of it. There is also a museum-style glass case displaying Rai cultural artifacts, such as cymbals, woven cloth and sacred herbs. To one side is a set of seats for official guests, who give speeches, only half-listened to by most; the chief guests' main task is to judge the dance competition.

Groups from different towns in England such as Maidstone, Nuneaton and Ashford compete for the prize of best dance group. The men are in spotless *daura suruwal* with matching coloured

cummerbunds, bow and arrow slung on their backs; the women in identical *dhaka* blouses, gold jewellery in their hair, and matching skirts and silver anklets. Men and women alternate and dance in a circle. In the centre a man sits cross-legged, his white turban stuffed with feathers, a sacred flask in his lap; he mimes spirit possession. Once the formal competition is over, the entire group – old and young, Nepali-dressed and mini-skirted, male and female – all join in one enormous circle. Everyone who cares to join dances for hours to the hypnotic four-beat rhythm. Having displayed its segmented parts through the formal competition, the community now dances out its unity.

Ex-Gurkha communities

In Aldershot, well known as an army town, the Nepali population is believed to have gone from less than 2 percent to more than 10 percent (the census reports a figure of 6.5 percent) within ten years. Many of them are ex-Gurkhas who came both in anticipation of and following the UK government's 2009 decision to allow all those with four years of service to settle in the country.

Rushmoor Borough (which includes Aldershot) is not a place one would immediately have associated with Buddhism, yet, at 3.3 percent, it has the highest proportion of Buddhists in the UK – one of ten surprising facts revealed by the BBC following the 2011 census. It is appropriate, then, that the Buddhist Community Centre UK bought a disused building owned by British Telecom in Aldershot and remade it into a Tibetan Buddhist *gompa* (monastery) and community centre. The campaign for a centre coincided with a visit by the Dalai Lama in 2012, when Aldershot Town Football Club was filled to capacity to welcome him.

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One highlight of the calendar is the Gurkha Cup organised by Tamu Dhee UK in Aldershot in May every year. It is not just a knockout football competition between 48 nine-a-side teams (the 2013 poster specified a maximum of "three local native players" per team); there are also food stalls, charity displays, traditional Gurung dances, khukuri dances and a military wives' choir. The pattern of socialising around football is no doubt drawn from a tradition of football competitions within the Gurkha brigade itself. But the Nepali diaspora is not the first diaspora population in the UK to work out that creating ethnic football contests is a great way to involve the male youth of the second generation; Greek, Turkish and Kurdish ethnic leagues, for example, have existed in London for many years. Other groups, such as the Yeti Nepali Association UK and the Magar Association UK, have launched similar football competitions.

What remains truly impressive is the sheer number of people devoting their time and energy for communal ends without any financial reward. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that everything is rosy and without friction. The desire for recognition sometimes leads to fierce competition in elections for the teams running the various organisations. Occasionally, such conflicts have been known to take on an ethnic tinge. They 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.

Local difficulties

There has also been friction with the local population. Again, Aldershot has been a flashpoint. Many of the ex-Gurkhas who settled there were elderly, spoke little or no English and were coming directly from their villages to the UK. They had won the right to settle in the UK, but only had their pensions, which were set at a level that was supposedly generous for Nepal but was so little in the UK context that they immediately became eligible for welfare benefits.

Concerned about the growth of the Nepali population over the last ten years, the local MP Gerald Howarth sent an open letter to the Prime Minister on 25 January 2011:

This issue is of deep concern to the local authority and its Leader as their services are in danger of being overwhelmed by this influx, as are those provided by the National Health Service, Citizens Advice Bureaux and local schools.

Some GP practices are struggling to cope. It is also causing immense tensions within the community which are exacerbated by the difficulties encountered by the Nepalese in integrating into the settled community, particularly given the low levels of literacy and often limited understanding of English.

Talk of an 'influx' was seen as provocative and labelled 'unhelpful' by local leaders of the Nepali community, but the MP was certainly articulating the feelings of his voters. They did not understand the Nepali custom of the 'morning walk' and somehow found it threatening that groups of diminutive old people, dressed quite differently, should hang around in parks and public spaces. Rumours about them spitting, urinating and excreting in parks where local children played started to circulate. Around this time, Nepali troops serving in the UN in Haiti were accused of being responsible for a cholera outbreak there. Connections between Nepalis, TB and cholera were flung about. At the same time, as the MP's letter claimed, doctors' practices in the area were finding it hard to cope with the sheer numbers of new patients, as well as with the fact that they did not have sufficient translators.

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Perhaps encouraged by the MP's letter, there were a number of alarmist articles published in the popular British press describing the overcrowded conditions the elderly ex-Gurkhas were living in and blaming Joanna Lumley, a well-known actress who had spearheaded the 2009 campaign to win Gurkhas settlement rights, for luring them to the UK with false promises. Later in 2011, when a local woman could not get an appointment to see the doctor, her husband, Sam Phillips, set up a Facebook page called 'Lumley's Legacy' as a focus for concerns about the number of Nepalis in the area. It generated considerable debate and quickly put up a 'mission statement' emphasising that:

THIS IS IN NO WAY A RACIST GROUP WE HAVE GREAT APPRECIATION FOR THE SACRIFICES THAT THE GURKHAS HAVE MADE FOR OUR COUNTRY

RACIST POSTS WILL BE DELETED AND THE MEMBER/MEMBERS FOUND RESPONSIBLE WILL BE REMOVED FROM THE GROUP WITHOUT PRIOR NOTICE

Indeed, those people who had been removed from 'Lumley's Legacy' "for having 'opinions'" set up another smaller and closed Facebook page some time later. And despite the non-racist intent, 'Lumley's Legacy' continues to provide an outlet for the kinds of concerns mentioned above, as well as for more mundane grumbles about noise, bad driving, political parties, rough sleepers and so on. In response, a local Labour councillor, Alex Crawford, set up yet another Facebook page 'We Love the Gurkhas', to counter the negative publicity found elsewhere, which quickly acquired many more members.

When tensions between young people broke out into gang scuffles, fears of worse happening led to the involvement of the police and community workers. A big public event, named 'Best of Both', was organised at the King's Centre in Aldershot on 4 February 2012. Gerald Howarth

attended, as did Tikendra Dewan, Chairman of the British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS) and President of the Greater Rushmoor Nepali Community. There were stalls displaying the work of ex-Gurkha charities, Rushmoor Borough Council, the local police and charities operating in Nepal. Nepali and British dance groups performed. The formation of a new football team that would include both Nepali and local British youth was announced. And the compere of the whole event was none other than Sam Phillips, who had set up the 'Lumley's Legacy' Facebook forum.

Although peace seemed to have been established, and the worst of the threatened violence had been averted, current community relations are by no means perfect. The *Daily Mail*, one of the UK's most read newspapers, carried a long online article in November 2014 with the title 'Joanna Lumley's legacy of misery: She fought to allow retired Gurkhas into Britain with her heart in the right place. Five years on, even they say it's backfired terribly'.

Many elderly Nepalis still experience low-level harassment (verbal abuse or having food thrown at them) and many white people still resent their presence in Aldershot. But several community groups, such as Maddat Samuha, which helps newly arrived women, and Naya Yuva, a youth group, work with the council and other bodies to try and counteract polarisation of the two communities.

Diversity

For its size and population, and thanks to its widely varying ecological zones and multiple histories of migration, Nepal is a leader in cultural diversity. Much of that diversity is reproduced in the UK, with the one big exception that Madhesis and Muslims from Nepal seem to be barely present. Dalits, who have fewer resources to migrate long distances, are also under-represented. As the work of Mitra Pariyar has shown, the Dalits who do make it to the UK face many of the same problems as in urban areas of Nepal: refusal to rent rooms, share kitchens or offensive remarks. The idea, propagated by many, that there is no caste prejudice in the UK is unfortunately wishful thinking, as UK Dalits from Indian backgrounds have also found.

This Gurkha connection makes the UK's Nepali population unusual when compared to other Nepali diaspora communities around the world. About two-thirds of UK Nepalis are either ex-Gurkhas themselves or related to one. This means that those ethnic groups who were historically favoured for recruitment into the British Gurkha regiments – such as Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu – are present in the UK in much greater proportions than elsewhere or in Nepal (this historic recruitment policy no longer holds and the Ministry of Defence's official position today is that recruitment is ethnicity-blind). Gurungs, also known as Tamu, are only 1.9 percent of Nepal's population, but are the biggest Nepali group in the UK with approximately 22 percent. Limbus are 1.5 percent in Nepal but 9.6 percent of the Nepali population in the UK. Magars, Gurungs, Rais and Limbus taken together are around 12 percent in Nepal but over two-thirds of the UK's Nepali population.

These respondents, given a singular choice, opted for Buddhism as their primary census identity. But once they were explicitly permitted to be both Hindu and Buddhist, they recognised that this was a better description of what they actually do.

The Gurkha history is reflected in residence patterns. In the UK, just as in India, wherever there is a military base, you are likely to find ex-Gurkhas living nearby, whether in large or small numbers. The highest presence of Nepalis in relation to local population is in Rushmoor Borough, in northeast Hampshire, where there are several military bases. Hampshire County has the second highest Nepali population after London. The third-largest is in Kent, mostly around Ashford, also near a base. Nepalis are found near military bases in Wales, Yorkshire and Essex, too. There are, of course, sizeable Nepali populations in some places without military connections: in west London (where there are many Indians) and in Plumstead in east London, as well as in towns such as Swindon, Carlisle, Oxford and Reading.

Religious reconstruction

The different demography of the UK's Nepali population not only gives a new flavour to the community's politics; it also changes the religious complexion. The overwhelming dominance of Hinduism in Nepal does not hold in the diaspora. Even though Nepal is no longer the world's only Hindu kingdom and declares itself a secular federal republic, nonetheless, 81 percent of the population is recorded as Hindu. This falls to 40 to 64 percent 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, many are also quite comfortable with practising several religious traditions at once. In a video that was shown as part of an exhibition on the Nepali diaspora in Surrey Heath Museum in 2012, Dr Chandra Laksamba, a Limbu and ex-Gurkha, gave the following explanation:

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 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).

This religious tolerance or coexistence in everyday life rubs up against the notion that modern nation states usually require people to belong to one, and only one, ethnic group and one, and only one, religion. The UK census has evolved to the point where multiple responses are allowed and even encouraged to the nationality question (one is encouraged to be both English and British, for example). Though only one answer is allowed to the ethnicity question, at least there are the options of 'mixed race' and 'other' for those who feel they don't fit into the straitjacket of accepted responses. However, where religion is concerned, only one response is allowed and there are no hybrid options (although one is allowed to omit to answer it). Religion is the last refuge of modernist purity.

In Nepali censuses, multiple responses are not allowed either, nor are hybrid ethnic identities envisaged. In fact, in the early days of the Nepali census, people were not accustomed to being asked, 'What is your *dharma*?' The census enumerators had to be instructed to find out what people's one-and-only-one dharma was and fill out the form accordingly. Today, Nepalis are more used to the question and some ethnic organisations such as the Nepal Magar Samaj campaign for 'their' constituents to list their religion as 'Buddhist', regardless of their actual everyday practice – which in most cases is not Buddhist at all.

The Vernacular Religion project included a detailed survey of 300 Nepali households in the UK. The enumerator asked people what their religion was, and once they had responded, read out a series of options that included multiple identifications (Hindu + Buddhist, Kiranti + Hindu, Kiranti + Buddhist, and even Kiranti + Buddhist + Hindu). Given a singular choice, the respondents opted for Buddhism as their primary census identity. But once they were explicitly permitted to be both Hindu and Buddhist, they recognised that this was a better description of what they actually do. About a third of those who at first answered 'Buddhist' switched to 'Hindu + Buddhist' when given the option. A large proportion of these people were Gurungs and many others were Magars.

Generational shift

The older generation of Nepalis spend a lot of time worrying about their children: they may speak Nepali, but will they acquire the habit of reading it? Will they take advantage of the educational opportunities in the UK (the main justification many Nepalis give for migrating in the first place)?

Will they ignore their parents' wishes, live separately, join gangs or have dissolute lives, rather than working hard like their parents? Will they retain a connection to Nepal?

The younger generation are, of course, more at home in the UK than their parents. Campaigns for equal pensions for Gurkhas or for dual citizenship, which galvanise many of their parents' generation, are not pressing concerns for them. They are much more familiar with British popular culture, whether that concerns music or sport. One can do a lot of growing up even in five short years. But judging by their musical tastes, which include many top Nepali bands, they continue to think of themselves as Nepalis. Nepathya, a leading Nepali folk rock band, filled the Wembley Arena in 2013, the first Nepali band to do so. Their success was just the tip of a lively Nepali youth cultural scene that blends Nepali and global influences. For young people, the link to Nepal is likely to remain. Many traditional concerns about purity and caste are likely to fade away. At the same time, young Nepalis have taken the lead, both in social work in the UK, as with the Naya Yuva group mentioned earlier, and in raising money for charitable purposes in Nepal. That is a good sign for the future of the UK's Nepali diaspora.

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