From *Lahures* to Global Cooks: Network Migration from the Western Hills of Nepal to Japan

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In the last few years, more than 1,800 Nepalis have migrated from a single rural village, Malma, located in the Western Hills of Nepal, to work as cooks in Nepali restaurants in Japan. So many people from the village are working in Japan that nowadays the local people have nicknamed it 'Little Japan'. These new economic opportunities became popular in Malma after 1990, and are now seen as the primary means of upward social mobility in the village. However, the process of migration is still difficult. With a few exceptions, each migrant pays 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US$15,000) to the restaurant owner to get a work visa. There are already more than 3,000 Nepali restaurants and over 55,000 Nepali migrants in Japan, making it the largest South Asian community in the country. Based on research in Japan and Nepal conducted from 2008 to 2015, this article explores the causes and patterns of migration from Malma to Japan, and the nature of the transnational ties between the Nepali migrants and their homeland. This article demonstrates how social capital has played an important role in the migration of Malma villagers to Japan, thus providing both the opportunity and incentive for many families to achieve upward mobility, but without solving the inequalities and status gap between the owner/manager and cook that complicate these social networks.

**Keywords:** migration networks; transnational ties; social capital; chain migration; Nepali migrants; Japan immigration; ethnic entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Nepali migration to Japan is a relatively recent phenomenon, but has grown rapidly in recent years. The number of registered Nepali migrants increased from 5,314 in 2005 to 55,236 in 2015, making them the largest South Asian community in Japan (Immigration Bureau of Japan 2016). From my fieldwork, I estimate that the majority (about 29,000 out of 55,000) are associated with Nepali restaurants serving Indian curries and *nan* bread in towns and cities throughout Japan. The Nepali migrants working in restaurants are classified for immigration purposes as ‘skilled labor (cook)’, which allows them to work legally in Japan. There are already more than 500 Nepali restaurants in Tokyo alone, and the number is still increasing. Recently, Nepali restaurants have spread to smaller towns in Japan, creating job opportunities for more Nepali migrants.

This article explores the causes and processes of Nepali migration to Japan, focusing on the formation and function of transnational networks. During my fieldwork, I was surprised to learn that more...
than 1,800 Nepalis had migrated from Malma, a single Nepali village of 6,400 residents, to work in restaurants in Japan. Nowadays the local people have nicknamed the village ‘Little Japan’, as so many people from the village are working in Japan. They move despite the exorbitant cost, with each migrant typically paying 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US$15,000) to a restaurant owner in Japan for sponsorship to enter Japan on a work visa. This article therefore examines the following questions: How have so many Nepalis from Malma village been able to migrate to Japan? Why did they decide to migrate there even though they had to pay such a large amount, and how could they afford to pay it? And what kinds of social networks and other transnational ties have developed between the village and Japan, providing prospective migrants with information, means of travel and the possibility of entry?

According to the oldest villagers, migration has a long history in Malma. Since the beginning of the 19th century, men from the village migrated to India to work: in the Gurkha regiments and civil service; as security guards and domestic workers; as manual laborers in mines, farms and factories; and in restaurants and hotels. In 1839, as a result of a special treaty between the government of Nepal and the Sikh empire (which covered much of what is now northern India and Pakistan), Nepalis were recruited into the Sikh army (Kansakar 2003: 93). These new recruits went to Lahore, the Sikh capital, and their countrymen back in Nepal started calling them Lahures after the city. Later, Nepalis serving in the British and Indian Gurkha regiments also came to be called Lahures (Kansakar 2003).

As in other villages in the Western Hills of Nepal, many people in Malma became Lahures, quitting their traditional occupation as peasant farmers, and emigration became a crucial part of the village culture and economy. Men fought for Britain and India in many regional wars, as well as the World Wars. My village survey shows that, up to 1980, more than 75% of the young men were leaving the village to travel to India to become Lahures. However, after the development of new social networks and forms of social capital from the early 1990s, the villagers began to migrate to Japan and other countries to work in restaurants as cooks. Utilizing their social networks and transnational ties, about 75% of the young men from the village are currently working as cooks in Nepali restaurants in Japan.

The literature on the role of social networks in supporting international migration movements is strongly influenced by Massey and colleagues and their research work in the Mexican Migration Project (Massey et al. 1987, 1998). According to Elrick and Lewandowska (2008), there are two approaches to social networks in migration studies: the first emphasizes the role of ‘hometown ties’ in facilitating international migration, including migrants’ social relations with their families, friends and communities. However, critiques of this approach point to the importance of other actors in the migration process, such as brokers, employers, and traffickers (cf Krissman 2002, 2005; Elrick and Lewandowska 2008). Migrant social networks are not necessarily always symmetrical or marked by reciprocity (cf Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes and Landolt 1996; Elrick and Lewandowska 2008), but may also involve a measure of exploitation. In this article, my goal is to explore the relationship between these two aspects of migration in a case study of the contemporary movement of Nepali cooks from Malma to Japan.

Nowadays, one of Nepal’s major exports is labor and most rural households depend on at least one member’s earnings from employment away from home, often abroad. As of January 2016, the total population of Nepal stood at 28,679,524. Approximately 4 million Nepalis worked ‘overseas’, mainly in India, the Middle East, and East and Southeast Asia. In addition, because of the uncertain political situation, natural disaster, lack of employment, and extreme poverty, more than 500,000 Nepalis depart annually to more than 105 foreign destinations seeking employment opportunities (Department of Foreign Employment 2014). As of 2013/2014, Malaysia had become the destination with the largest number of Nepali migrants (Department of Foreign Employment 2014).
Foreign labor migration has become a major feature of Nepal’s economy and society, with international remittances to Nepal contributing 29.1% of the country’s GDP (Department of Foreign Employment 2014). Nepal is one of the world’s poorest countries with an annual per capita GDP of US$8–900, and about 20% of the population still lives below the poverty line of US$1.25 a day, so many migrate to escape poverty.

Recently, Japan has become a popular destination for Nepali migrants. In Japan, Nepali restaurant workers can earn over 10 times the average wage in Nepal. From my fieldwork in Malma and among Nepali immigrant communities in Tokyo and Hokkaido, I found that the average Nepali migrant worker working in a restaurant remits home about 80,000 yen (US$ 800) per month. Some migrants send their money home through informal channels, while others send it through banks and money transfer companies.

Despite the rapid growth of Nepali immigrants in Japan, research in this area is so far limited. There is some scholarship on undocumented Nepali labor migration to Japan (e.g. Yamanaka 2000; Minami 2008), but little on skilled labor migrants. This dearth of research is particularly problematic because workers in restaurants and their dependants constitute a significant proportion of Japan’s total Nepali population. A case study of migrants from Malma working in Japan illustrates the complexity of the dynamics of migration between labor-rich and capital-poor countries such as Nepal, and capital-rich countries with rising labor demands such as Japan (cf. Castles and Miller 2009). While the economic disparities between Nepal and Japan are clearly motivating factors in Nepali decisions to migrate, the social networks that now connect Malma to Japan also influence them, owing to the economic and social inequality that exists between members of these networks. This article argues that inequality within transnational networks helps explains why people migrate just as much as more general global political and economic factors.

2. Background: Nepali Migration to Japan

According to the Immigration Bureau of Japan (2016), at the end of 2015, there were 2.23 million foreign nationals registered in Japan. Until the mid-1980s, most foreigners in Japan were of Korean and Chinese origin, often referred to as ‘Zainichi’ Koreans and Chinese. Between 1984 and 2004, over a quarter of a million more Chinese arrived in Japan to study either in universities or pre-university language schools (Liu-Farrer 2009: 185). Meanwhile, there has recently been a decreasing number of Korean immigrants, down by 1.7% in 2015 (Immigration Bureau of Japan 2016).

However, Japan’s status as a major global and regional economic player also resulted in the arrival of migrant workers from other parts of the world (Douglass and Roberts 2003). The large-scale immigration of Nikkeijin, workers of Japanese decent predominantly from Latin America, dates from the late 1980s (Douglass and Roberts 2003), as does the arrival of thousands of migrants from other parts of Asia, including the Philippines, Pakistan and Bangladesh. According to Suzuki (2008), early Filipino migrants to Japan included musicians and sportsmen, but by the 1980s, many of the migrants were women on entertainer visas, often working as hostesses in bars and clubs. As Japan experienced increasing labor shortages in the mid-1980s, large numbers of labor migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh also arrived and worked (generally illegally) in factories or construction (Castles and Miller 2009). Mahmud (2013) notes that Bangladeshi migration to Japan accelerated between 1987 and 1989. Japan launched a visa waiver program for a few Asian countries, including Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi population jumped from a few hundred to over 34,000.
Nepalis, in contrast, never enjoyed the privilege of visa-exempt entry to Japan (Yamanaka 2000), but some did arrive from the early-1980s (Sharma and Gurung 2009), totaling with 986 entrants in 1986 (Immigration Bureau of Japan 1987–2015). Most Nepali migrants in the 1990s entered with the status of ‘short-term visitor’, which did not permit them to work legally (Minami 2008). However, many found what were known as ‘three-K jobs’ (from kitanai, kiken, kitsui, in Japanese, meaning dirty, dangerous and difficult), and overstayed their visas. According to Yamanaka (2000), the undocumented Nepali immigrants were able to come to Japan and worked illegally because of their social networks, both within their own groups and linking them with the wider Japanese society. During my fieldwork in 2013 in Tokyo, a Nepali immigrant who had entered Japan illegally and had been living in Tokyo for over 25 years described a strategy used by undocumented Nepalis in Japan during the 1990s:

In the 1990s only 5–10 percent of Nepalis used to have papers to stay legally in Japan. All the others did not have papers. They worked in factories for the whole day and usually did not go outside due to the possible fear of deportation. They worked, ate, played, slept, and did everything inside the factory. Occasionally, if they went out, they dressed in suit, held in English newspaper and took a taxi to show they were businessman, to avoid checking from the Japanese police and immigration officers. (Fieldnotes, August 2013)

The Nepali immigrant laughed and further added, ‘If I tell you about our life story in those days, you will be surprised. It was really difficult for Nepali to enter and stay in Japan in the 1990s and the early 2000s’. Here is how one of Minami’s informants managed it:

At first, my friend and I went to Hong Kong and stayed there a week, and then we left for South Korea, which granted a fifteen-day visa at the point of entry to Nepali tourists in those days. In Seoul, we rushed to a travel agency to ask for advice about entering Japan. The agency staff finally showed us a persuasive flight schedule to go to Saipan, which requires three days’ transit in Narita, Japan. With these air tickets and a hotel booking slip, we could get a “transit” visa for Japan and infiltrated from the airport hotel into Tokyo. (Minami 2008: 90–91)

By the late 1990s, there were approximately 300,000 undocumented visa-overstayers in Japan from all over the world, almost all of whom were illegally employed (Douglass and Roberts 2003). The total number of undocumented Nepali overstayers reached a peak of 2,712 in 1997, falling to 2,178 by 2005 (Minami 2008: 98). The recent reduction in illegal overstayers is common among foreign workers in Japan in general. Although it is partially the result of a tightening of Japan’s immigration policy, it is also a result of changes in the categories of workers able to work there legally. Like some other OECD countries, Japan has shifted to restricting its foreign worker intake to ‘skilled labor’, and has established new penalties for employers hiring undocumented foreign labor. In 2003, the Japanese government began a campaign to reduce ‘the number of illegal overstayers by half in five years’, through strict passport controls at the port of entry and more prosecutions of undocumented workers.

By the late 1980s a few Nepalis had already immigrated to Japan to work legally as cooks in Indian curry restaurants, learning about the business over the years. They also learned about a new visa category in Japanese immigration law, that of ‘skilled labor (cook)’, which allowed them to work legally in curry restaurants. By the early 2000s, a few Nepali immigrants, including some from Malma, began to open their own restaurants. They were mainly migrants who had already worked in restaurants for several years, developed social networks, and learned entrepreneurial skills and the Japanese language. The Nepali restaurant trade grew rapidly in the years between 2004 and 2012, and the rate of immigration to Japan from Malma and its neighboring villages in the Western Hills of Nepal rose accordingly. The large number of Nepalis able to migrate to Japan to work at curry restaurants
as ‘skilled labor (cook)’ because of networks developed by earlier Nepali cooks which I call ‘Cook Connection’. In my interviews, many Nepali immigrants told me that it became easier over time for Nepalis to enter Japan because of their well-established social networks, which enabled them to complete the immigration procedures. The migration from Malma to Japan is an excellent case in point.

Based on space and capacity, each Nepali restaurant can bring in three or four Nepali cooks as skilled labor. According to a Nepali restaurant owner in Tokyo who has lived in Japan for 25 years, it has become easier for Nepali migrants to open restaurants as they can find almost all the resources necessary in their own ethnic community. This is an example of an ‘immigrant enclave economy’ (Portes and Jensen 1992: 419), defined as ‘a concentrated network of ethnic firms’, generating business opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs and jobs for ethnic employees. The number of Nepali migrants who entered Japan with ‘skilled labor’ visas rose from 586 in 2005 to 10,134 in 2015. Nepalis constitute the second largest group of ‘skilled labor’ applicants after the Chinese (Table 1).

These numbers indicate that the restaurant industry involves a large part of the Nepali community in Japan, and that restaurant-related immigration is the single largest influence in the rapid increase in Japan’s Nepali population, making them the largest South Asian community in the country (Table 2). The 2015 population of Nepali immigrants (55,236) was double that of the Indians (24,524) and five times that of the Pakistanis (10,894). The majority of Indian immigrants in Japan work as engineers and IT professionals (D’Costa 2013), whereas Pakistani immigrants generally work in factories or as entrepreneurs (Kudo 2009).

Besides the restaurant trade, Nepali migrants also include students, trainees, professors, doctors, and company workers. Tokyo has the largest concentration of Nepali immigrants with over 16,974 distributed throughout Tokyo prefecture. Fukuoka prefecture is the next largest center with about 4,275, while Chiba, Kangawa, Osaka, Hokkaido and Oita also have significant numbers.

3. Social Networks and Migration

The concept of social networks in migration studies has been discussed by many scholars over the years (Massey et al. 1987; Boyd 1989; Gurak and Caces 1992; Portes 1995; Heering et al. 2004; Olwig 2007; Elrick and Lewandowska 2008; Castles and Miller 2009; Ryan 2011; Bankston 2014; Ryan et al. 2015). Generally, in migration studies, social networks are represented as a web of social ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants to one another through social relations of kinship, friendship and shared community origin. These social ties increase the likelihood of international migration. Networks may also be considered as patterns in the flow of communications (Bankston 2014: 3). According to Putnam (2001), there are two types of social ties: bonding, i.e. ‘ties to people who are like me in some important way’; and bridging, i.e. ‘ties to people who are unlike me in some important way’. This approach has been particularly influential within migration studies.

Table 1. The Top Five Countries of Origin of Skilled Labor in Japan in 2015.

| Country          | China | Nepal | India | Thailand | South Korea |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------------|
| Number of skilled labor immigrants in Japan | 16,174 | 10,134 | 4,223 | 1,133 | 1,020       |

Source: Immigration Bureau of Japan (2016).
Bankston (2014) has noted that bonding ties are rich in trust and are based on dense networks that allow transfer of valuable capital between community members, while bridging ties yield greater access to information from outside the community. Thus, Putnam’s concepts of bonding ties and bridging ties are closely associated with Mark Granovetter’s earlier conceptualization of ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). The Nepali migration from Malma village to Japan involves both bridging as well as bonding ties, as can be seen from a description of the migration process.

Although Taylor (1986, 1987) represented social networks as a source of ‘migration capital’, Massey et al. (1987: 170) appear to have been the first to describe migrant networks as a source of social capital. Since then, numerous migration scholars have begun to utilize the concept of social capital as an important tool for understanding how networks affect migration (cf Anthias 2007; Elrick and Lewandowska 2008; Haug 2008). As Bourdieau and Wacquant note (1992:119), ‘Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’.

Social capital theory argues that social networks are useful because they offer network members different kinds of resources such as funds, goods and information (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008). According to Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993), there are four sources of social capital: ‘value introjections’, ‘bounded solidarity’, ‘reciprocity exchange’ and ‘enforceable trust’. ‘Value introjections’ refers to the socialization of persons who act and behave in ways due to their internalized norms and customs. This means of accessing resources is available to migrants depending on the community to which they belong and the community members’ attitude towards helping each other. ‘Bounded solidarity’ focuses on the situational circumstances of ethnic groups. Bounded solidarity is perceived as group-oriented behavior based on internalized norms, value and customs. The third source of social capital, ‘enforceable trust’, is associated mostly with family contexts or with certain cultural norms in ethnic communities. ‘Reciprocity transactions’ are the fourth source of social capital, and are common in the context of migration, in which people exchange information for goods or other information.

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| Year | Numbers of Migrants |
|------|---------------------|
| 2005 | 5,314               |
| 2006 | 6,596               |
| 2007 | 8,417               |
| 2008 | 11,556              |
| 2009 | 14,745              |
| 2010 | 17,149              |
| 2011 | 20,103              |
| 2012 | 24,071              |
| 2013 | 31,537              |
| 2014 | 42,346              |
| 2015 | 55,236              |

Source: Immigration Bureau of Japan (2005–2016).

(see for example Fernandez and Nichols 2002; Nannestad et al. 2008). Bankston (2014) has noted that bonding ties are rich in trust and are based on dense networks that allow transfer of valuable capital between community members, while bridging ties yield greater access to information from outside the community. Thus, Putnam’s concepts of bonding ties and bridging ties are closely associated with Mark Granovetter’s earlier conceptualization of ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). The Nepali migration from Malma village to Japan involves both bridging as well as bonding ties, as can be seen from a description of the migration process.

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the migration, their relative social locations, and the actual resources available and realizable within their social networks, following Ryan et al. (2015). The majority of contemporary Malma migrants rely on social networks of families, relatives, friends and shared community origin to generate social capital to support their migration. Their movements can be described as ‘chain migration’: the tendency of migrants to follow their kin and home country associates to a new land means that from the very beginning migration is a profoundly social process, based on social connections (Bankston 2014: 2). Massey et al. (2002: 19) apply the concept of social capital to chain migration, positing that, ‘each act of migration creates social capital among people to whom the migrant is related, thereby raising the odds of their migration.’ The case of Malma, where 1,800 residents have moved through transnational social ties, in many ways fits this model; however, more analysis is needed of the process through which the migrants access, develop, and maintain networks with Indian curry restaurant owners in Japan and how they use such networks to succeed in their migration.

Specifically, the relationship between the Nepali immigrants working as cooks and the Nepali restaurant owners in Japan complicates our understanding of migrant social networks (Anthias 2007). Each of these Nepali cooks pays 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US$15,000) to restaurant owners in Japan to get work visa sponsorship to enter Japan. According to the Nepali cooks, many Nepali owners have opened new restaurants in Japan specifically to bring in more Nepalis and earn money from each migrant. I was informed that a single Nepali owner had opened seven Nepali restaurants in Hokkaido in the last four years and brought in 30 more Nepalis to Japan, earning US$ 450,000. This suggests that Nepali restaurants owners have been involved in two roles: in Japan, they establish restaurants where newcomers can work; and back home they act as agents, providing information, encouraging young people to try their luck in Japan, and selling them work visas. In the light of these cases, the proposition of Massey and colleagues that social networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin, which reduces the costs of subsequent migration (Massey et al. 1993: 448) is therefore an overly general and positive view of migrant networks. Given complex and, at times, exploitative, chains of migrant interaction, the picture becomes less positive (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008).

Additionally, the case of Malma migration to Japan also suggests that we need to modify the concepts of ‘migration agents’ and their business (Salt and Stein 1997) and the ‘migration industry’ (Castles 2007). The Nepali restaurant owners are playing complex roles: as ‘agents’—persons who want to be materially rewarded for passing on information; as ‘intermediaries’—persons who exchange information for nonmaterial rewards (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008); and as members of the Nepali ethnic entrepreneurship enclave in Japan, establishing restaurants, creating jobs opportunities, and bringing in their friends, relatives and neighbors. According to Castles (2007), agents play roles between migrants and employers to facilitate migration using their social contacts in the country of origin and their well-established ties in the destination country. Here, however, the Nepali restaurant owners are employers themselves and many of those I studied turned out to be deeply embedded in migrant networks, as they were from the same villages as the migrants, and originally migrated to Japan as cooks themselves. My data therefore shows a complex relationship between migrant networks and a migration industry in which owners play roles as agents.

4. Methodology: Multi-Sited Ethnography of Transnational Migration

I conducted multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995) in Japan and Nepal to document the causes, process and social consequences of Nepali migration to Japan, collecting empirical data from both ends.
of the migration chain. In order to understand the roles of the migrants’ social networks in the migration process, it was important to investigate the people and the families in both places. Using Creswell’s (2013) concept of qualitative inquiry, I collected data using in-depth interviews with the immigrants in their homes or places of work, allowing them to tell their stories. Besides interviews, participant observation was conducted in a wide range of settings, utilizing both a video camera and a field journal to record my experiences and observations. My initial contact with Nepali immigrants occurred while doing visual ethnographic fieldwork in Hokkaido in 2008, resulting in a film, Playing with Nan (Kharel and Saito 2012). Over the following seven years, additional data was collected through in-depth interviews with 125 Nepali immigrants in Tokyo, Osaka and Oita, Japan.

A Nepali groceries shop at Shin-Okubo station was one of my main locations for this research. On average, 500 Nepalis a day would visit the shop. Shortly after beginning my research at the shop, I became familiar with the lively interaction, discussion and activities among the migrants. There, they used to chat in Nepali and exchange information about friends, jobs and news from home. For the immigrants, the shop was not only a place for buying Nepali groceries but also for meetings that were important in adjusting socially, culturally, and economically to an unfamiliar environment. As noted earlier, fieldwork in Malma village was conducted, as well as in a few other villages in the western hills of Nepal, allowing for further ethnographic data regarding the causes, processes and social consequences of Nepali migration to Japan. I visited the Malma village three times and altogether stayed there more than a year. Surveys were conducted with 133 households and this was supplemented by 20 in-depth interviews and active participation in the daily lives of the people, such as accompanying them to the Hatiya local market for shopping, receiving remittances, meeting friends, or exchanging news.

5. Research Findings

5.1. The Development of Nepali Migration from Malma Village to Japan

Malma village is located in the Baglung district of Nepal, about 197 km west of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The Galkot area of the Baglung district, which was a separate kingdom from 1574 to 1787, covers 16 adjacent villages, including Malma, and its residents still refer to themselves collectively as ‘people of Galkot’. According to the Malma Village Development Committee (VDC) Profile 2011, the total number of households (ghar) in Malma is 1,057 with a total population of 6,487 (3,283 males and 3,204 females). Approximately 32% of the Malma population is less than 15 years of age while 47% of the population is between 16 and 44, 12% are between 45 and 59, 6% are between 60 and 69, and 4% of the population are over 70 years. The mean family size is 6.4. The adult literacy rate in Malma is 80%.

These days, Malma relies less on agricultural production than before, and the villagers depend on international remittances for their livelihood. There are communication technologies such as mobile phones, radios, TVs and internet services in the village. Buses, Jeeps and mini-truck are the main forms of road transportation. A newly constructed if still bumpy road connects the village to towns and cities. Thirty shops now provide the ordinary necessities of life, but residents frequently visit Hatiya, a nearby market town, to buy specialty items. Sometimes, the villagers also make the four hour bus trip to Baglung city because, compared to Hatiya, it is a more colorful and exciting place.

According to the life stories offered by elderly residents in Malma, the villagers’ way of life was once very different from contemporary times. Historically, Malma village was a small-scale farming community deriving the bulk of its income from rice, corn and millet cultivation. Agriculture
in Malma was based exclusively on human and livestock power and was labor-intensive. As in other hill villages in Nepal, population growth, the scarcity of agricultural land, and oppressive land taxes and labor policies developed in the 18th and 19th centuries (Poffenberger 1980; Shrestha 1985,) ensured that permanently residing in Malma was economically unviable.

After the Treaty of Sugauli, the peace treaty between the East India Company and the king of Nepal in 1816, men from Malma and other villages in western Nepal, began to migrate to India to join the Gurkha regiment and become Lahures, through the British local agent or galla. The villagers who worked first with the Gurkha regiments introduced their juniors to army jobs. Thereafter, many young people from the village followed their seniors to India, joined the army and became Lahures, creating a link between Malma village and India. While working in India, the Lahures found out about other employment opportunities through their social relationships with Indian people and companies. To use Putnam’s (2001) terminology, as Lahures they acted as bridging agents, later utilizing their bonding ties in passing the information on to their families, relatives and neighbors in the village (Putnam 2001). The Lahures encouraged and helped others who could not join the army to follow them to India to work as laborers. Subsequently, people from the village also started to migrate to India to work in the Indian catering trade as cleaners and helpers. These patterns carry on today. For young people in the villages, going to India for employment became a general trend. As a result, a large number of Nepalis from villages of Gulmi, Baglung and other districts in western Nepal gained knowledge of the catering trade in India, a pattern of chain migration in which early migrants opened the way for later migrants from their families, relatives, or locality, resulting in clustering.

During the early 1980s, a few Indian businessmen opened Indian curry restaurants in Japan, capitalizing on the bubble economy and an interest in new foods in Japan. The Indian businessmen also employed a few Nepalis from Baglung district who had already been working in Indian catering. According to a Nepali restaurant owner in Tokyo, when an Indian restaurant company called Nanak started the first Indian restaurant in Fukuoka in 1984, it employed Tanka, a Nepali worker, as a cook. Tanka was one of the first Nepali cooks from Baglung to migrate to Japan. Before this, he had worked in a restaurant in India for several years that belonged to the same owner. The owner was impressed by his skill and hard work and so took him to Japan. Other Nepali migrants were also able to go to Japan because of the social, financial and human capital that they acquired while working in Indian restaurants in India. The Indian businessmen may be referred to as bridging agents (Putnam 2001): bridging or ‘weak’ ties (Granovetter 1973) can provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own immediate social circles.

With the advent of the Indian restaurant boom in Japan during the late 1980s, there was a great demand for reliable emigrant labor. The owners of Nanak preferred to hire Nepalis to work in their restaurants whenever possible because they were thought to be cheaper and more trustworthy than Indian workers. According to a Nepali who worked for eight years at the Nanak restaurant, the Indian owner was impressed by the Nepalis’ honesty and hard work, so he asked Tanka and other Nepali cooks to recruit more Nepali workers from their villages. By the late 1990s, more than 100 Nepalis from Baglung district, including Malma, had already migrated to Japan to work for Nanak as the company opened branches in other parts of Japan. Gangalal was one of the first cooks from Malma to migrate to Japan through a network established by an earlier migrant who was also his maternal uncle. In addition, other Indian restaurant companies in Japan such as Bokxi and Samrat employed more than 200 Nepalis from districts in the Western Hills of Nepal such as Baglung, Gulmi, and Magdhi. In the 1980s and 1990s, an emigrant from Malma moving to Japan to work in Indian restaurants needed approximately

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1. All the names of individuals in this article are pseudonyms.
60,000 Nepali rupees (US$ 600) to cover his passage, new clothes and other immediate expenses. Generally, migrants collected the passage money through their ‘hometown networks’ of family members, relatives and friends, and sometimes they received loans from neighbors.

Until the late 1990s, there was a common understanding among Nepalis that you had to be Indian to get a visa to work in Indian curry restaurants in Japan. Therefore, the Nepali migrants used to procure Indian passports with the help of Indian restaurant owners, local brokers, and social networks in India. Gangalal remarks:

I obtained an Indian passport in 1998 with the help of an Indian restaurant owner. The passport showed I was from Haryana, India. It was not so difficult for Nepalis to procure an Indian passport back then. Nepalis could obtain it by showing an Indian ration card which was easily obtainable.

According to Gangalal, he had to spend 26,000 Indian rupees to obtain an Indian passport and apply for a work visa to Japan in the late 1990s. Indeed, the formal paperwork involved in passport applications, certification of work experience and applying for work permits in Japan was too complicated for ordinary villagers to comprehend, so a system of intermediation from Indian restaurant owners was needed. The Indian owners also used to support visa applications to the Japanese embassy in India to bring in more Nepali workers as their restaurants expanded throughout Japan.

From this description of the Nepali cooks’ migration with the help of Indian restaurant owners, we can argue that ‘reciprocity transactions’ worked as a source of social capital for the migrants (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). The Indian owners worked as both ‘agents’ and ‘intermediaries’ to manage the migration, and they received both material and non-material rewards from the Nepali cooks (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008). Specifically, they provided help with the paperwork involved in migration in return for cheap and reliable Nepali workers for their restaurants in Japan. It can be argued that the cheaper wages and greater reliability of the Nepali cooks were translated into social capital in their relationships with the owners (Bankston 2014).

The Indian owners were very shrewd. They operated their restaurants in Japan through their companies’ head offices in India and they paid the salaries of the Nepali cooks in Indian currency. The salaries were good by Indian standards but much lower than the average in Japan. For example Bhakta, who migrated to Japan in 1993 to work at the Nanak Indian restaurant in Oita used to receive a monthly salary of 12,000 Indian rupees (US$220); this was almost double his salary in India, but only a tenth of the average Japanese salary. During the 1990s, Japanese workers in other restaurants were paid a starting wage of about 200,000 yen a month (US$2000).

During the 1990s some Japanese businessmen also opened Indian restaurants, providing an alternative to the Indian restaurants for some Nepalis who had already worked there for several years. One of my informants who migrated to Japan in 1988 had worked at the Nanak Indian restaurant in Oita for four years with a monthly salary of 10,000 Indian rupees (US$200). During this time, he never received a raise, so he left Nanak for an Indian restaurant with a Japanese owner in Hiroshima with a monthly salary of about 100,000 yen (US$ 1000). In fact, during my fieldwork in Tokyo, I met many Nepali cooks who moved from Indian-owned to Japanese-owned curry restaurants because of the attractive salaries and other benefits.

Nepali migration illustrates the interconnection between social networks and migration. Following Charles Tilly (1990), Bankston (2014: 28) writes, ‘while social networks enable migration, migration also reshapes networks, and those reshaped networks produce new categorical identities and forms

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2. The Indian Ration Card is mainly use for purchasing subsidized food and fuel, but is also used generally as proof of address and identity.
of cooperation’. This suggests the ways in which new bridging ties generate new opportunities for migrants that influence the ways their social networks develop and change. The social relationships with Japanese businessmen established by some Nepali cooks opened up new employment opportunities with better salaries and benefits. For the Japanese owners it was also a good deal, because employing these cooks was cheaper than bringing in new cooks from India and they already had a few years’ work experience in Japan. The cooks circulated information about their salaries and benefits to the rest of the community. Many began to feel that they were being exploited by the Indian restaurant owners, and wanted to leave the Indian-owned restaurants with their low pay. However, at that time there were not many Japanese-owned curry restaurants in Japan that paid higher salaries. As a result, there was a growing motivation among the Nepali cooks to open their own restaurants in Japan.

5.2. The Formation of Nepali Entrepreneurship and the Malma Migration Flow to Japan

Until the late 1990s, only a handful of Nepalis had managed to survive as proprietors of Indian curry and nan restaurants in the Tokyo suburbs. In the early 2000s, a few people from Malma village managed to open their own restaurants. Gangalal, whom I introduced earlier, was one of the six original founders that I was able to trace during my fieldwork in Tokyo. Although there were others, the six whose life histories are known to me all spent several years working in other Indian restaurants, learning about restaurant management and developing relationships with Japanese. Bhakta, another of the initial restaurant owners, migrated from Malma in 1992 through a link with a neighbor who was already working in a restaurant in Japan. He worked at the Nanak restaurant in Fukuoka for four years and then moved to an Indian restaurant in Tokyo belonging to a Japanese businessman, where he worked for eight years. By 2004, Bhakta had opened his own restaurant in Tokyo. According to him, this was a very difficult venture for a Nepali immigrant in the early 2000s because of the complex procedure for starting a new restaurant at a time when the Nepali community was still small. In addition, there were language and cultural barriers. These six Nepali restaurant owners had all accumulated several years’ work experience together with social, human and financial capital from their social networks, including Japanese friends, the Nepali immigrant community, and their family, relatives and friends in Nepal. Bhakta says, ‘It would not be possible to open my restaurant without support from my Japanese friend’. This friend helped him to find a place and a company to set up the interior of the restaurant, design and print out the restaurant menu, and handle all the paperwork for registration. Bhakta also relied heavily on support from his Nepali immigrant friends to run the restaurant successfully. He found workers through his Nepali immigrant networks, and collected together capital of 7.5 million yen to open the restaurant from his family, friends and relatives. My data shows that generally the early Nepali owners needed to invest about 10 million yen to open a restaurant during the early 2000s, and they raised this through their networks.

These initial restaurant founders also acted as catalyst for a second wave of migration from Malma to Japan. Their restaurants were major channels in the accelerating flow of migration. In fact, they played two roles: establishing restaurants in Japan where newcomers could work, and acting as agents and intermediaries back home (Elrick and Lewandowska 2008), encouraging young people to try their luck in Japan, and selling them work visas. Their role supported two general trends in Nepal: increasing perceptions of Japan as a good place to work, and young people’s growing desire to become global. As more and more young people made the choice to leave, the inhibitions of others were overcome by a contagious wave of optimism. During my fieldwork in Malma, villagers remembered this time vividly: ‘Japan jana sabai tate, lahar nai ayo ni—soon the whole village was boiling with excitement to go to Japan. Everyone wanted to go to Japan’. Targeting these prospective
migrants, an increasing number of Nepali migrants opened new restaurants. As a Nepali immigrant said, ‘Many Nepali owners have just opened Nepali restaurants in Japan to bring in Nepalis and earn US$ 15,000 from each migrant. Here, bringing in Nepalis is a better business than selling curry and nan’. This evidence from the migration process suggests the development of a ‘migration industry’ (Castles 2007). One of the major factors shaping the success of new restaurants is the ability to generate capital from visa sponsorship fees. In the film Playing with Nan (Kharel and Saito 2012: 50:20), a Nepali cook, working at a Nepali restaurant in Hokkaido says of his owner as follows:

At first we didn’t know why we needed to pay 1.5 million Nepali rupees ($15,000) to get into Japan. The owner told us he needed money to pay for insurance and buy the work visa. We didn’t doubt the owner in the least back then. But after I came to Japan I knew the reality. The owner earns 4.5 millions Nepali rupees in cash by bringing in three Nepalis. That is enough to open a new restaurant here. This is how the owner benefits from bringing in Nepalis. The owner could open the restaurants in Japan from the money that he took from us. The owner said he had earned enough money with his restaurant company. He has a good life these days in Japan.

I asked a Nepali restaurant owner about selling work visas: he had migrated to Japan 11 years previously and had been running a restaurant chain for eight years, expanding to nine branches. He argued that it was reasonable to take visa sponsorship fees from Nepali migrants. He explained that he was creating good work opportunities in Japan by opening restaurants. ‘I needed money to open restaurants in Japan and I’ve opened the restaurants to bring in Nepalis. In fact, both groups—Nepali restaurants owners and cooks—are in a win-win situation’. The majority of Nepali immigrants also think that paying for a work visa is a kind of business investment, without which they will lose their opportunity to go to Japan. According to an old villager in Malma, people in the village are willing to pay about 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US$ 15,000) to go to Japan because they will get a regular monthly salary. From the above description of the social relationships between the different actors involved in the migration process, we can argue that there is not just symmetrical reciprocity, but a complex balance of solidarity and exploitation, trust and conflict, and reciprocity and business transactions within the Malma migrant network.

Nepali restaurant workers earn a monthly average of 100,000 yen in Japan, which is about 10 times the average salary in Nepal. While economic factors shape Nepali migration to Japan, these factors are embedded in transnational ties rather than simply ‘push–pull’ dynamics. Moreover, tales of success are reshaping perceptions of why one should go overseas. The attractions of highly paid restaurant jobs and the possibility of remittances were such that nearly every village in Baglung, Gulmi and a few districts in western Nepal went through a period of ‘migration fever’ (Watson 1975). One of my informants in Malma village remarked that, hearing about earning opportunities, the villagers began to dream that ‘there is a money tree in Japan where they can easily earn money, like picking leaves off a tree’. The possibility of striking it rich in Japan created a dynamic that helped alleviate the fears of the older generation and persuaded even the most conservative of them to let their sons migrate. The Nepali restaurant owners presented migration as a heroic task, the source of all opportunity and advancement, and Japan as a haven of peace and prosperity. As one old villager remarked:

In our village, everyone thinks Japan is a very good, beautiful country. There is no conflict, dirt and mud but a good earning opportunity, unlike Nepal. In Japan, everybody is rich, clean and happy, unlike here. Therefore, we are willing to pay about 1.5 million Nepali rupees to go to Japan because we benefit. If our sons can work in Japan for 15–20 years they can earn millions of yen. (Fieldnotes November 2012)
From the mid-2000s, the Indian curry restaurant business prospered in Japan. People from Malma responded to this opportunity and organized themselves for larger-scale migration by utilizing their families, friends and kin groups so effectively that many people between the ages of 22 and 50 left the village. Judging from passport data made available to me by the Baglung District Administration and household survey data collected during my fieldwork, I estimate that by 2014 there were at least 1,800 Malma migrants living in Japan. Furthermore, the household survey indicates that nowadays more than 75% of young males have migrated to Japan to work as cooks. However, this is a continuation of an older tradition of migration. As I noted earlier, during the 1970s and 1980s, according to my informants, some 75% of young males used to work in India as Lahures.

The significance of migrants’ social ties can also be observed in the process of raising the capital necessary to migrate. About 30% of the migrants in the Malma have obtained their passage money directly from kin working abroad. This means that the remittances from current migrants are largely channeled to sponsor prospective migrants. For example Hari, a prospective migrant in Malma village, turned to relatives, a family with a member working in Japan for the last five years, for help to cover his passage money. This family provided him with a loan of 1.5 million Nepali rupees at 15% interest. Thus, remittances contribute to chain migration by raising awareness of opportunities and funding migrants.

In Malma, kin are also available as mediators in difficult dealings with government authorities and other stakeholders related to migration. The migration process needs a number of dealings with government administrators and businessmen in order to procure passports, official documents and certificates of work experience. A number of retired Lahures in Malma have become village leaders and formed a village committee, and they are often asked to serve as mediators for dealings with private companies, entrepreneurs or government authorities outside the village. Currently, many village leaders have active business connections with the restaurant owners in Japan. Many of their brothers and sons are working there, and they sometimes visit them. Those leaders are becoming increasingly knowledgeable and are able to give advice on the maze of laws and regulations governing immigration to Japan. This kind of knowledge and information is particularly precious to the prospective emigrants and normally is not easily obtained in other villages in Nepal. The Malma villagers’ and leaders’ experience and expertise gives Malma residents a competitive edge and is a significant factor in the success of migration. In effect, then, families, relatives, friends, and the village committee act as a kind of migration agency.

5.3. The Expansion of Nepali Entrepreneurship

According to my fieldwork data, there are about 3,000 Nepali-owned Indian curry restaurants in Japan, which makes Nepalis the largest ownership bloc in the restaurant trade in the country. Even though their owners and workers are Nepalis, most of the restaurants established by Nepalis are known as ‘Indian’ curry restaurants in which the cuisine is adjusted to suit the palate of the Japanese clientele. Tokyo has the largest concentration of Nepali-owned restaurants with over 500 distributed throughout the prefecture, while Osaka, Chiba, Kanagawa, Fukuoka, Hokkaido, Oita and other prefectures have significant numbers. Most of the restaurants owned by Malma villagers are located in Tokyo and Osaka. The Nepali restaurant trade grew rapidly in the years between 2004 and 2012, and the rate of immigration to Japan from Malma and its neighboring villages and districts rose accordingly. The majority of restaurants were established as chains during the boom phase. One Nepali restaurant owner is reputed to have an ownership stake in 21 restaurants located in different parts of Japan. A handful of restaurants owned by Nepali immigrants from Malma village have become amazingly successful. One success story
involves a Malma villager who began his career as a cook at an Indian restaurant in Japan in the late 1990s. He left the village in his late twenties with little more than the clothes on his back but, by the late 2000s he had become the proprietor of five lucrative restaurants in Japan and had brought in 27 people from the village. During my fieldwork in Tokyo, I observed a Nepali owner who opened his first restaurant in Tokyo in 2010: he extended his chain of seven restaurants to different parts of Tokyo in the next five years and brought in 42 more Nepalis from his and neighboring villages, earning about US$ 630,000. With this, he had bought a beautiful house in Kathmandu costing 30.5 million Nepali rupees (US$350,000). He was planning to open his eighth restaurant in Tokyo the following year. However, Nepali restaurant owners still claim that bringing in people is not their main business, which is to sell curry. However, they still think that it is reasonable to take work visa sponsorship fees from Nepali migrants because they are creating job opportunities by opening restaurants where Nepali migrant workers can earn 10 times as much as in Nepal.

The economic recession that Japan has weathered over the past 25 years has had a serious impact on the business of high-class Indian restaurants in Japan. From the late 1990s to now, almost 60% of these restaurants, including many of those established by Indian businessmen, have gone bankrupt. An important factor was that they could no longer find cheap Nepali cooks. They could not import cheap Indian cooks from India, as Indian cooks prefer to go to the UK, Europe and the US where they already have well-developed transnational networks. As a result, the Indian owners could not run restaurants with low overheads, so they had to put up their prices. However, due to the recession, the Japanese are now less inclined to pay high prices when they dine out. In response, the restaurants owned by Nepali migrants undercut those owned by Indians. It is important to note that the Nepali restaurants are doing well. The reasons, of course, are that the Nepali owners work very hard themselves, as well as utilizing enthusiastic young Nepali migrants prepared to work long shifts with unpaid overtime so that they can reduce overheads. Participant observation in Nepali restaurants in Tokyo and Hokkaido showed that Nepali workers work 16 hours a day, from 8 am to midnight, cooking, cleaning and washing dishes, six days a week. Therefore even in the smaller Japanese cities the Nepali restaurant business is going well. Some of the Nepali immigrants have also started take-away shops, predominantly in the metropolitan areas, which are cheaper to run than restaurants.

The Nepalis are involved in various types of Indian curry restaurants in Japan, from ‘high-class’ to ‘family’ restaurants. The immigrants categorize their restaurants according to the quality and authenticity of the food served, the place, and the size of restaurant. Some Nepali restaurants located in the center of Tokyo, in major shopping centres like Ginza or Shibuya, are considered ‘high-class’ because of their location, elegant interiors, and the authenticity of the food served. Here, a standard dinner for one can cost over 5,000 yen. However, the majority of Nepali restaurants in Japan are family restaurants that have 20–35 tables and employ between three and five full time workers. My ethnographic data shows that a family restaurant makes an average monthly turnover of 2.5–4.0 million yen. A standard dinner for one in this type of restaurant runs over 1,500 yen, which is about the average for medium-priced restaurants in Japan.

According to knowledgeable informants, it takes between 5 and 9 million yen to open a 20–35 table Indian curry restaurant in the Tokyo suburbs. However, it takes less to open a restaurant in a smaller city in Japan. For example a Nepali owner invested about 4.5 million yen to open a restaurant in Hokkaido in 2006. Of course, some Indian restaurants in Tokyo and Osaka, particularly elegant restaurants, have startup costs of over 10 million yen. However, the Nepali owners still anticipate earning back their start-up capital after a few years of hard work and self-sacrifice, while some restaurant owners in smaller cities earn back their opening expenses within a few months due to a lack of competition and lower costs. As I have described already, the majority of restaurant owners generate startup capital from visa sponsorship fees.
Another reason for the expansion of Nepali entrepreneurship is the enthusiastic aspirations of the new Nepali immigrants to be entrepreneurs. The first aim of Nepali immigrants who begin as restaurant cooks is to pay back the loans they received to pay their visa sponsorship fees. After this, they send home remittances to buy land and housing. The next goal of many Nepali immigrants working in restaurants is to reach a level of independent proprietorship. As time passes, immigrants begin to retain more and more of their savings and they too think of opening a restaurant. They also dream of earning money by bringing in other Nepalis, as their bosses did. These days, investment in restaurants in Japan is thought to be more secure than local enterprise. In Nepal, investing in business is risky, and people can lose catastrophically. Furthermore, as a young Nepali cook appearing Playing with Nan (Kharel and Saito 2012: 20:15) says, ‘it is very difficult to get a loan from moneylenders to start a business in Nepal. The moneylenders think it’s a big risk to provide a loan for a business in Nepal. They prefer to give loans to people who go abroad for work and earn money’. Another issue that makes business riskier in Nepal is the unstable political situation following the Maoist insurgency. Considering the risks in Nepal, the ideal pattern among Nepali immigrants is to work hard and save diligently until one has enough money to buy into a new restaurant in Japan. Informants in different parts of Japan estimate that it takes the average immigrant from three to five years to accumulate sufficient capital to start a new restaurant.

Nowadays, the Nepalis can establish their restaurants with remarkably little help from institutions or individuals outside their own ethnic community. There are Nepali solicitors who offer consultation services to immigrants opening new restaurants, and some Nepali companies have opened to provide a wide range of restaurant services, such as selling Nepali groceries, graphic design, printing menus, pamphlets and leaflets, and advertising. Furthermore, the restaurant niche does not require a high degree of knowledge and understanding about the host culture. In the last few years, it has been quite simple for immigrants to start a restaurant once they have found the capital and a suitable location. Restaurant proprietors need only obey Japanese immigration laws and restaurant business regulations, and they are comparatively free of outside intervention. The restaurant niche lends itself to the traditional patterns of intensive labor and long-term saving that have historically characterized Nepali labor migration. It is one of the easiest economic niches for Nepali immigrants to enter in Japan, and it causes the least difficulty to members of Japanese society.

New opportunities and openings have appeared as the Nepali restaurant boom has taken off: travel agencies, remittance companies, graphic design and printing companies, specialized grocery shops, food processing and distribution, schools and media. These businesses and services focus on serving the Nepali immigrant community; only a small proportion of their income derives from non-Nepali customers. The leaders providing most of these services are young Nepalis who have graduated from Japanese schools or universities. A young Nepali man who graduated from a Japanese university in 2009 opened his own travel agency in Tokyo the same year. His business has been thriving as Nepali family migration has started, rather than just the migration of single males. The majority of these young Nepali graduates still lack the Japanese language and cultural competence to find work in Japanese companies, unlike the Chinese students described by Liu-Farrer (2009, 2011). Therefore, they have limited themselves to these ethnic enclave niches largely in response to strong competition from other ethnic minorities in Japan for salaried employment.

5.4. The Nepali Restaurant Niche

According to a Japanese customer at a Nepali restaurant in Hokkaido, he visits the restaurant at least once in a week to help reduce his stress from work. When he visits the restaurant, he sees a different society, tastes different food, listens to different music, and feels a different environment from that
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present in his everyday Japanese life. Japanese customers’ desire to experience difference ensures that even Nepali immigrants without much Japanese language ability are doing well in the restaurant trade. Indeed, the Nepali restaurant trade is ideally matched to the needs of an immigrant group of this nature because it forms a low-profile niche on the periphery of the Japanese economy. Unlike so many other immigrant groups in Japan, the Nepalis do not compete directly with Japanese workers. This may be one reason why the Nepali immigrants as a group are not perceived as a ‘problem’ by the Japanese authorities.

In general, every Nepali restaurant in Japan has three categories of employee: cooks, kitchen workers, and waiters. In family restaurants, normally the proprietor himself, or his wife, handles the tasks of waiter and cashier if they are competent enough conversationally in Japanese. In some cases, restaurant owners also hire Japanese part-timers because they are needed to help the customers place their orders. In general, every restaurant hires from two to four Nepali men for the kitchen, at least one of which has a few years’ work experience in Indian curry restaurants in Japan. Even though the remaining workers also entered the country with visas as cooks, they may still lack competence in cooking. From a sample of 80 cases, it appeared that the average monthly salary of Nepali cooks in 2012 was 100,000 yen, which was certainly lower than the Japanese standard. Japanese workers in ordinary restaurants were paid a starting wage of about 220,000 yen during the time of my study. There are also a few highly paid, expert Nepali cooks in Tokyo, Osaka, and other big cities but these immigrants work in the more prestigious restaurants.

Monthly salaries are not the only advantage of working in Nepali restaurants, because, in most cases, the restaurant proprietor is responsible for providing meals and lodging for his employees. These benefits are not deducted from the salaries, which means that the restaurant workers may earn significantly more than the average unskilled Japanese worker. The immigrants, however, claim that they deserve higher incomes and argue forcefully, sometimes bitterly, that Japanese would never tolerate the long hours and poor conditions common in the Nepali restaurant trade. Cooks work 16 hours a day, six days a week, and are sometimes required to stay even longer to clean up. They also complain that their lodgings are poor with more than five people confined to a small, hot room. With few exceptions, the Nepali restaurant workers feel that their life in Japan is arduous and that their high earnings come at great human cost. From the everyday life of the Nepali workers at Nepali restaurants and their relationship with the restaurants owners, we may assume that there is an element of exploitation as well as reciprocity in the formation of social capital, as discussed by Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993).

While I was living with the Nepali cooks in Japan, observing and filming them in their everyday activities, it seemed that many of them had only learned a few words of Japanese, even after years of residence in Japan. However, they pronounce two Japanese phrases very well: *Irashaimase!* (welcome!) and *Arigato gozaimasu* (thank you very much). A few young Nepalis are sufficiently fluent to carry on conversations with their Japanese customers, and, in general, each Nepali restaurant hires at least one employee who is proficient in Japanese and is able to act as an intermediary for the others. More than 70% of Nepali restaurant workers I spoke with stated that they had no Japanese friends. Only a few are interested in making new friends or changing their way of life. A Nepali cook from Malma told me, ‘I do not have enough time to learn elements of Japanese culture because my primary goal is to accumulate money’. In fact, they rarely have opportunities to meet Japanese people. Many of the Nepali cooks and kitchen workers seldom emerge from the kitchen, except in unexpected cases when they needed to serve customers to cover for an absent waiter.

From my observations, I found characteristic differences between Nepali restaurants owners and Nepali cooks. Generally, the Nepali cooks had limited opportunities to interact with the wider
Japanese society. Most of the time, they communicated with each other in Nepali, ate Nepali food every day, listened to Nepali music, followed Nepali news, and celebrated Nepali festivals. Even their everyday work consisted of making food quite similar to Nepali cuisine. The socio-economic niche that the Nepali restaurant trade controls allows the cooks to live, work, and prosper without changing their way of life much to suit Japanese social expectations. The everyday life of the Nepali cooks relies on dense intra-ethnic bonds that provide them with social capital. However, almost all the Nepali owners I met had Japanese friends and were sufficiently fluent to carry on a general conversation with Japanese friends and customers. They had developed good social relations with the wider Japanese society outside their own community, which enabled them to succeed in their business, relying on both bridging and bonding ties. One day, a Nepali restaurant owner in Tokyo remarked, ‘Here, without speaking Japanese you can not join to a Japanese nomikai (drinking party), and without joining a nomikai you can’t make good Japanese friends, and without making good Japanese friends, you can’t succeed in business in Japan.’ From the life stories of 53 Nepali restaurant owners, I learned that to be a successful Nepali restaurant owner in Japan you need to have good social ties with your own community as well as with the wider Japanese society.

6. Conclusion

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article has explored the causes and processes of Nepali migration from Malma to Japan and demonstrated the complex relationship between social networks, social capital, migration, and migrant entrepreneurship. On the one hand, social capital generated from bonding ties such as family networks, neighbors, friends, and shared common places of origin enabled the migrants to raise the money to migrate, and to obtain emotional support as well as help with local immigration procedures. On the other hand, bridging ties such as links with Indian restaurants owner and Japanese businessmen initially helped the migrants find employment opportunities. But once a few people from Malma had taken the plunge, ethnic networks developed, and a pattern of large-scale migration to Japan began to emerge. Once the village had built up links with Japan and developed social capital, migration became normalized: rather than being perceived as risky and out of the ordinary, it became the best alternative for young men who could raise the capital to go.

The article also demonstrates how social capital played an important role in the migration of Malma villagers to Japan, providing both the opportunity and incentive for many families in the village to achieve upward mobility. However, it also shows how social capital plays a critical role in developing inequality within these social networks. The ethnographic evidence clearly shows a degree of inequality within the transnational networks of Nepali migrants, and how this resulted from differences in individual capacities of mobilizing the social capital available within the network. Furthermore, by investigating the social relationship between different actors involved in the process of Malma migration to Japan, particularly the relationship between the restaurant owners and cooks, the article argues that migrant social networks are made up of more than just symmetrical ‘hometown ties’. Indeed, there is a complex balance between solidarity, exploitation, trust and conflict within Malma migration networks. For example a Nepali owner can earn US$ 15,000 by bringing one Nepali into Japan, while a Nepali cook needs to work very hard for at least two years (16 hours a day, six days a week) to earn this amount of money. Furthermore, as I have described, each Nepali cook pays 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US$15,000) to restaurant owners in Japan to get sponsorship for a visa; this refutes the proposition that migrant networks reduce the costs of migration (Massey et al. 1987;
Goss and Lindquist 1995) and raises questions as to whether social networks really reduce costs as much as is sometimes assumed.

This research should be seen as an attempt to understand the migration from Malma to Japan and how it intersects with the village’s foreign employment tradition, from Lahures to cooks. From the case of Malma migration to Japan, it can be understood that migration is not a static relationship between labor suppliers and receivers, but is continually renegotiated between various nodes within a network: from peasant to Lahure and from Lahure to cook and beyond. From the 1930s to 1990s, remittances from Lahures and India were perceived as a prime means of improving one’s socio-economic position in the village. Malma was known as a village of Lahures. However after the 1990s, villagers’ dreams of gaining social mobility became connected to Japan.

Today Malma village is known as ‘Little Japan’. Many villagers work in Japan as cooks, maintaining transnational ties and social relationships between Japan and Nepal, further stimulating chain migration between the two countries. The chain migration of more than 1,800 people already from Malma village is one indicator of the immigrants’ ongoing ties, networks, and social relationships with their home community, while optimistic stories coming from Japan about low risks and better economic opportunities have encouraged more people to move. This has lead to a ‘culture of emigration’ in which working in Japan has become a ‘rite of passage’ for young people in Malma (Castles and Miller 2009: 62). Nepali migration from Malma to Japan differs from traditional patterns of migration because there is a lower incidence of return migration. Many of the older residents of Malma are worried by the trend toward family emigration because they fear their sons will break their ties with the village when they no longer have to return to see their families. Malma villagers assume that the increasing emigration of dependants in recent years is proof that ‘many Nepali migrants from Malma have decided to make Japan their permanent home,’ and not all will return.

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