

The Issue of Foreign Born Population in Nepal: A Short Essay in Honor of Dr. Harka Gurung

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Introduction

This essay has two sections. The first section gives some introductory remarks on the contributions of Dr. Harka Gurung in the field of population geography and identifies the most common theme with which he is remembered for by most geographers and social scientists in Nepal. The second section gives an account of immigration pattern in Nepal presenting facts and raising issue on whether Nepal can continue to remain inactive without regulating the flow of immigrants. The paper argues that there was a time when Nepal had welcomed immigration from the south and now there is a need of regulate flow of both internal and international migration in the country. Considering the growth of population over the past five decades, unrelenting unemployment and underemployment, ethnic tensions in potential recipient area, poor economic growth of the country, it is imperative to regulate immigration. This spatial dimension is an area of population studies in Nepal for which Dr. Gurung is better known. Therefore, this essay is regarded as a tribute to late Dr. Harka Gurung.

Dr. Harka Gurung and His Contribution to Population Studies (Geography)

Among the Nepalese social scientists Dr. Harka Gurung is best known to plea for immigration control and/or regulation in Nepal. He was probably the native scholar who knew more about ins and outs of migration dynamics in the country than any other Nepalese scholars of his time. In the early 1980s, when the Taskforce on Internal and International Migration in Nepal which he headed, presented its recommendations which included regulation of immigration, some intellectuals in the society vehemently opposed the recommendations, to the extent that he should be hanged for such recommendations. *India Today* (a popular magazine from India) in one of its issues immediately after submission of Report on Migration headed by Dr. Gurung presented a picture which showed a board at the entry point to Nepal from India which read as WELCOME TO NEPAL. Added to this picture of welcome was the caption: [but] *Gurung says no more welcome*. For various reasons both: internal and external, the recommendations of the task force did not materialize. But it really raised the awareness among Nepali intellectuals and policy people about the issue of immigration.

With this report the media portrayed him more as a nationalist than anything else, Dr. Gurung was a “true” geographer with depth of knowledge, extent of travel, power of observation and capability of succinct presentation. As such he dedicated his 67 years of mortal life in academics, not an easy career choice for a person of his [Gurung] ethnic background where *lahure* culture (recruitment in British/Indian army) predominate other career goals.

Dr. Gurung, an unparalleled figure of Nepalese geography, lost his life in a helicopter accident in Ghunsa, Taplejung on September 23, 2006. Thus, his journey of life which started at Taranche, Lamjung in January 5, 1939 ended at Ghunsa, Taplejung. As Sharma (2006:1) notes Dr. Gurung in his typical style would have put it “*from the small village of Taranche in Lamjung to Phale [Ghunsa] is a mere 375 km as the crow flies.*” With all his writings, roles and responsibilities in various spheres of social and public life e.g., papers in this issue, he demonstrated that he was *much more*. He was not only a distinguished geographer, social scientist, champion of rights of indigenous nationalities but he also elevated the status of geography and geographer in the academia and in the society in Nepal. Dr. Gurung had his distinguished personality and obviously he had different identity for people of different community. As a planner he championed approach of regional development. He was a noted tourism geographer and mountain chronicler. Nevertheless, in his later life he had been portrayed more as champion and defender of indigenous nationalities and minority rights. Likewise, the context of his tragic end together with other world conservationists further re-enforced his personality as one of Asia’s finest conservation leaders of the century.

In the field of population studies (geography) his outstanding contributions remain in four main areas namely, *population patterns in general, change and distribution, migration and social demography*. All these titles form classical fields of population geography. His earliest article on population issue was the one presented in the Symposium of International Geographical Congress held in New Delhi in 1968 where he discussed population patterns and processes in Nepal. “Demographic aspect of development” is second notable research article which was presented in a Seminar organized by CEDA and later published as Seminar Paper 2: CEDA Study Series (working paper) in 1971. This paper was later published as a Chapter in *Population and Development in Nepal* (1975). It exemplified the geographical approach stating how population patterns of Nepal relate to development of a country. He also had some other articles about economics of population control (Gurung, 1970a, 1970b). In sum, during late 1960s and 70s, Gurung’s article on population paid attention to population patterns, controls and its economics.

His articles on population during early 1980s focused on population distribution in general and change in particular. These themes and methodologies adopted, typically follow what is known as *distributional approach* in population geography in which patterns get

prominence over processes, results are based on national census and macro-level surveys and attempts are to present empirical findings rather than ‘-isms’ and rigorous theories. “Population Change in Nepal (1971-1981)” primarily deals with the distribution of population as per two censuses and changes taken place over the decades (Gurung, 1984). Changing patterns are discussed at the regional as well as at the district level using data from decennial censuses. In 1987, he presented a seminar paper about global population growth and Nepal where he placed the population growth of Nepal in the wider global context. This seminar was organized to observe world population reach 5 billion mark on July 11, 1987.

The third theme of his research in population geography is migration both internal and international. The theme he pursued and his patriotic stance on citizenship and border control with respect to international migration not only made him popular but also for some a controversial personality. His contribution with respect to Task Force on Internal and International Migration and its 70 recommendations has already been noted in the beginning. Primarily his publications on migration issues present regional patterns and their implications. Whereas, some of them directly deal with policy implications of migrations others are concerned with affecting factors. Moreover, all his papers on migration present in-depth analysis of hill to Tarai migration and policy debate emanating from this to Indo-Nepal relations. Again, his papers were more on presenting empirical findings. His publications namely *Inter-regional Migration in Nepal: Problems and Prospects* (1984) and *Regional Patterns of Migration* (1989) are clear examples of this approach. No doubt, he was one of most widely read person on migration and regional development. He was very articulate on presenting ‘issues’ in brief and in tables. However, he seems to be little concerned with incorporating ongoing theoretical and conceptual debates of migration and population in his publications.

The fourth theme of Dr. Gurung’s prolific writing in population can be stated as social dynamics of population. During later years his writings on population reflected progression from classical pattern oriented population geography towards more of social dynamics of demography. The issues of political demography, social demography including issues of ethnic identity and social inclusion/exclusion form most of his later year essays. They do reflect the true social landscape of Nepal where social inequalities and exclusions based on caste and regions are more common than rare. These are also the areas where social geographers of Nepal have much to contribute.

Considering the four major themes contributed by Dr. Gurung, the following essay attempts to capitalize on one of the themes he engaged in for long and is best remembered for. This is in view that honoring a towering figure through essay on the theme which he carried out throughout his career will do justice to his dedication for the cause.

Foreign-Born Population in Nepal

The Context

After Second World War most national governments considered free movement of people as conducive to economic growth of the nations. As a result many countries perceived immigration as helpful element of nation building. Immigration thus was perceived positively by the nation states in the second half of 20th century. Nepal is no exception. Notwithstanding the overall world environment of 20th century, it has long welcomed immigrants from the South as well as from the North. However, in due course of time, the same immigration has become a great concern in the context of incessant flow from south as result of open border with India. In most situations, immigration brings another nation in the country. Considering Nepal's small size in both, territory and population with respect to its neighbors, many Nepalese perceive this persistent flow as a threat to national stability and security.

Given the historical and cultural linkages, India has remained a major destination of for short-term and seasonal employment for overwhelming majority of Nepalese emigrants (Subedi, 1991, 2005). Therefore, Indo-Nepal migration as any other international migrations involves two components: immigration i.e., entry of Indian aliens in the country and emigration i.e., out-migration of Nepalese citizens to India. Of the two components, this paper reviews the immigration pattern only. It is to be noted that the unrecorded movement of Indians and Nepalese across Indo-Nepal border and the role of remittance in the economy as a major source (See, Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 1999) mean that the implications of the short-term and circular movement (international) are far reaching.

Data and Methods

The analysis in this paper is based on data available from census documents. In Nepal, for lack of periodic surveys on migration, decennial population censuses are the main sources of data on immigration. To date, six decennial censuses of international standards have been conducted in the country. The 1952/54 census is generally noted as the first 'scientific' census of population although for lack of single year reference in this census some consider Population Census 1961 as the first scientific census in Nepal. The Population Census 1961 for the first time reported data on foreign born population and foreign citizens (nationals) in the country. All subsequent population censuses continued to report this information. Thus, two sets of data: foreign-born population and citizenship of the individual have been the main data source utilized in this paper. Form 1 Q.N 9 of National Population Census 2001 puts the question as *what iscitizenship (citizenship as to the country must be circled and specified for others)*. The options provided in the question include Nepali, Indian, Chinese and other. This form is called short-form and was used for complete, 100 per cent enumeration.

The other set of data on immigration comes from Form 2: Q.N. 4 which puts the question *as what is place of birth (code must be circled, if the place of birth other district or other country the name must be specified)?* This form was administered on a sample basis i.e., one in every eighth housing unit in each enumeration area (EA). For making estimations the census administration used ratio estimation method. This paper utilizes both the foreign born population and foreign citizens recorded in the country at the time of census enumeration. The Census Bureau assumes that “the sample estimates are generally consistent with 100 percent counts and the estimates have small sampling errors.” (CBS, 2002). The quality of data is as good as the overall quality of census itself and that generalization down to the district level are generally considered as accurate.

Welcoming Foreign Citizens: Immigration Trends and Patterns

The history of immigration in Nepal dates back to its early settlement and the process of state formation. Nepal’s historical and cultural linkages with India and China and the caste and ethnic diversity across various ecological zones in the contemporary Nepal are lucid examples immigration into Nepal. Despite the presence of China and India both being population giants of the world and with whom Nepal shares its border, the Indians remain foremost immigrant group in Nepal due to open border with India and the free flow of citizens.

The Trends

Population Census 1961 recorded a total of 337,620 foreign born population and this constituted 3.6 percent of the total population of the country. Over the past four decades, the census data have portrayed erratic trend on the volume of foreign born population. Between 1961 and 2001, however, an overall increase of 80 percent is evident (Table 1). Data on foreign citizens in Nepal during the same time demonstrate a similar pattern. Nonetheless, the number is far lower than the number of foreign born population. The latest census recorded the proportion of foreign citizens in the country to be only 0.6 percent of total population.

Table 1. Foreign Born Population in Nepal

Census year	Foreign born population	Foreign born as % of total	Foreign citizens in Nepal	Foreign citizens as % of total	Total population
1961	337,620	3.59	110,061	1.17	9,412,996
1971	337,448	2.92	136,477	1.18	11,555,983
1981	234,039	1.56	483,019	3.21	15,022,839
1991	439,488	2.38	90,427	0.49	18,491,097
2001	608,093	2.67	116,571	0.59	22,736,934

Source: Respective Population Censuses.

Between 1991 and 2001 the number of foreign born population in the country increased by 38.4 percent. This translates into an addition of 168,605 persons over the inter-censal period. Even the proportional share of foreign born population in the total national population has increased although by a small percentage point i.e., from 2.38 to 2.67 percent. It is to be noted that this increase has taken place in a situation where the nation's total population has increased by 2.25 percent per annum during same period.

Whereas the country suffers from high rate of natural increase amidst stagnant economy, an increase in foreign born population from 234,039 (1981) to 608,093 (2001) is noticeable. This figure suggests an increase of immigrants by more than 2.5 times over two decades and thus a concern for state especially while planning for social provisions. On the other hand, their competition for job and employment with native born population cannot be overlooked. More importantly, this increase has taken place in a situation where there has been a large increase in labor migration from the country to South Asia and Gulf countries in recent years (Subedi, 2005).

The Pattern

While the presence of sizeable number of foreign-born population in the country is itself an important aspect, its geographic or spatial concentration is equally important. The implications of immigrant concentration in a particular location are quite obvious as compared to their dispersal throughout the country. The records of Population Census 2001 suggests that an overwhelming majority i.e., more than 84 percent of foreign born population is recorded in Tarai and they are mostly of Indian origin. Even within Tarai there is concentration in the central Tarai. The Eastern and Western Tarai follow this. (Table 2). The proportion of immigrants living in the Mountain region is minimal (less than one percent). Given the proximity to China especially with Tibet Autonomous Region, it is likely that most of the foreign born population living in the Mountain region is of Chinese origin. Of the total foreign-born population living in the country 15 percent is recorded in the Hills. Within the hills their concentration has been largely in the Central hills and it is followed by Western hills. The location of capital city in the Central hill has much to do with large presence of foreign born population in this sub-region.

The Population Census 2001 recorded 608,093 foreign born population in the country. Among them 96 percent (583,599) was India born. Those born in China constituted 0.21 percent and that of Bhutan 0.40 percent. Likewise, those born in European and Non-Asian countries constituted only 0.41 percent. The remaining proportion was from other Asian countries.

The number of foreign citizens in a country is another indication of immigration in the particular country. Census 2001 recorded a total of 116,571 foreign citizens in Nepal (Table 3). Compared with records of ten years ago) this figure is an increase by 28.9 percent. For

example, the Population Census 1991 recorded a total of 90,427 as foreign citizens in the country then. Among those recorded in 2001 nearly nine out of 10 is Indian. This is due to multiple factors ranging from proximity to culture to state policies. As Subedi (1991) noted applying Myron Weiner's framework, immigration in Nepal has been shaped by at least four clusters of variables namely differential, spatial, affinity and access variables. In other words, the large scale movements of people across the borders in general in Nepal and immigration in particular are induced by high differentials, small distance, close affinity (culture, religion, language, kinship) and unrestricted rules of entry and exit.

Table 2. Regional Concentration of Foreign Born Population in Nepal, 2001

Regions	Sub-regions	Foreign-born population	
		Number	Percent
Mountain	Eastern	1571	0.3
	Central	1099	0.2
	Western	63	0.0
	Mid-Western	41	0.0
	Far-Western	1541	0.3
	<i>Total</i>	<i>4315</i>	<i>0.7</i>
Hill	Eastern	11316	1.9
	Central	42235	6.9
	Western	28705	4.7
	Mid-Western	4857	0.8
	Far-Western	3630	0.6
	<i>Total</i>	<i>90743</i>	<i>14.9</i>
Tarai	Eastern	142281	23.4
	Central	201181	33.1
	Western	107952	17.8
	Mid-Western	38973	6.4
	Far-Western	22648	3.7
	<i>Total</i>	<i>513035</i>	<i>84.4</i>
<i>NEPAL</i>		<i>608,093</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: Population Census 2001.

Foreign citizens from other countries comprise only 12 percent. The other countries with sizeable proportion of their citizens in Nepal include Bhutan, Pakistan, and China. Foreign citizens from rest of the individual countries constitute less than one percent. In total, setting aside Asian countries listed above, 3.5 percent foreign citizens belong to other Asian countries (Table 3).

Table 3. Foreign Citizens in Nepal, 2001

Country of citizenship	Total number	Percent
India	102,468	87.9
China	1344	1.2
Pakistan	2628	2.3
Bhutan	3827	3.3
Bangladesh	79	0.1
Sri Lanka	89	0.1
Maldives	77	0.1
Other Asian countries	3777	3.2
European countries	708	0.6
North America	626	0.5
Australia/NZ	307	0.3
Other countries	641	0.5
Total	116,571	100

Source: Population Census, 2001.

Regional Dimension

Since Indian citizens constitute nine out of 10 foreign citizens in Nepal, it is desirable to analyze their regional concentration and change over time. In 1991, a total of 68,457 Indian citizens were recorded. This number reached 102,468 in 2001. This shows a net addition of 34,011 or increase by 49.7 percent (Table 4). Most noticeable increase is evident in three sub-regions: central hill, central tarai and eastern tarai. Of all the sub-regions, highest increase is observed in the central hill and the increase is by 149 percent. Similarly, central tarai recorded an increase by 81 percent and eastern tarai by 45 percent. In terms of three ecological zones, hill recorded the highest increase. On the contrary it is only the mountain that recorded negative change. But the number recorded in this region is so small i.e., less than 0.4 percent, that its impact in the total change is negligible.

The numbers obtained from population censuses especially about international migration are on the lower side. It is generally believed that the actual figures are several times higher than what has been reported in the censuses. This is notwithstanding the underreporting of five percent or more in two latest censuses (see, Joshi, 2003). However, despite under enumeration and low number, the trends and patterns of international migration as demonstrated by census figures remain valid.

Table 4. Regional Distribution of Indian Citizens in Nepal, 1991 and 2001

Regions		Total		Change	
		1991	2001	Number	Percent
Mountain	Eastern	162	83	-79	-48.8
	Central	298	96	-202	-67.8
	Western	44	17	-27	-61.4
	Mid-Western	170	15	-155	-91.2
	Far-Western	134	190	56	41.8
	<i>Total (Mountain)</i>	<i>808</i>	<i>401</i>	<i>-407</i>	<i>-50.4</i>
Hill	Eastern	1,686	1,308	-378	-22.4
	Central	8,610	21,412	12,802	148.7
	Western	2,593	3,600	1,007	38.8
	Mid-Western	743	255	-488	-65.7
	Far-Western	453	291	-162	-35.8
	<i>Total (Hill)</i>	<i>14,085</i>	<i>26,866</i>	<i>12,781</i>	<i>90.7</i>
Tarai	Eastern	20,265	29,402	9,137	45.1
	Central	15,511	28,089	12,578	81.1
	Western	6,226	7,475	1,249	20.1
	Mid-Western	5,403	5,820	417	7.7
	Far-Western	6,159	4,415	-1,744	-28.3
	<i>Total (Tarai)</i>	<i>53,564</i>	<i>75,201</i>	<i>21,637</i>	<i>40.4</i>
NEPAL		68,457	102,468	34,011	49.7

Source: Population Census 1991, 2001.

Conclusion

The cultural practices of Asian societies especially the South Asian, promoted population growth from historical times and the best blessings one could get from parents and seniors during festivals and rituals was ‘be fruitful and multiply’ or let your off-springs capitalize the ecumene in this earth.” But time has changed. In Nepal we have promoted population growth in Nepal for centuries. As the world is moving fast to stabilize population growth, we have already started intervention on the natural course of population. With fertility down to TFR of 3.1 births and infant mortality of 48 deaths per 1,000 live births (NDHS 2006) plus improved level of education and public health situation the ultimate demographic question in Nepal is one of migration especially international migration.

In the words of Lamm (1997:114) “*a world that has always promoted population growth is now moving fast to stabilize that growth. Both at a world level and at a regional level, people are thinking the unthinkable, questioning the unquestionable, and reforming the unalterable.*” These statements in general and the second part in

particular aptly apply to contemporary Nepal. Nepal government no longer promotes population growth and its population policies since 1970s exemplify this. Nepalese social landscape has been changing to the extent that couples have relegated inherent meanings of blessings of the past about off-springs and are now emphasizing a few but the quality.

Obviously, Nepal welcomed immigrants from south from historical times and that immigrants have been accommodated in the local and national economy so far. But time has changed and Nepal's internal condition has also changed much. We did not have refugee problem when Gurung et al. (1983) recommended control of immigration from south. But now we have more than 107,000 Bhutanese refugees living in the Eastern Tarai, a sub-region with second largest concentration immigrants. The national population dynamics implies similar scenario. A rough estimate based on inter-censal growth of population suggests that between 1991 and 2001 Nepal had a net annual addition of 466,033 people in the country. Every month 38,836 people are added and of this, 21,503 are added in the Tarai, 15,251 in the hills and 2,082 in the mountain. Over the decade there has been an average net addition of 1294 people per day. Of this 55.4 percent (717) is likely to be added in Tarai, 508 in the hill and the rest in the mountain. Time has changed.

Ethnic sentiments in Tarai has been high and the social divisions such as *pahadi* (hill persons) vs *madhesi* (plain person) and that arguments such as Tarai belongs to *madhesi* (only?) is becoming political slogan of many local organizations. In recent months, Tarai has been the most troubled location of the country and that criminal activities have gone up taking advantage of political instability (See for example, *Himal* 30 May-14 June, 2007). Demands for Tarai as a separate state has taken lives of tens of people over the past 10 months and among them seven are civil servants on duty (see for example, *Kantipur Daily*, July 19 2007). Open border is often perceived as one of the facilitators so as to fuelling instability and criminality.

Putting all these threads together in the context of spatial concentration of immigrants, changing scenario of the country, nation's unemployment and under-employment (four percent unemployment and one-quarter of labor force working 1-19 hours only as per NLSS 2003/04) plus 2.25 percent per annum growth rate, any Nepali is bound to think the unthinkable and question the unquestionable and ask a question how long can we accommodate immigrants. And how do we regulate immigrant flow from India especially when 77.3 percent Nepalese absentee population according to Population Census 2001 is also destined to India (589,050 out of 762,181) and approximately 77 percent internal migrants in Nepal have made Tarai as their destination. It is not an easy premise to control the flow. The stakes are high but unrestricted rules of entry and exit especially during times of instability in the country is not in the benefit of both the countries. In this context, Report of a Commission headed by Dr. Harka Gurung as early as in 1983 stated a strategy of

regulating movements across Indo-Nepal border should be pursued (Gurung et al., 1983) bears further relevance.

Regulating immigration in the context of socio-cultural similarity between India and Nepal and centuries of unrestricted rules of entry and exit between the two countries is not easy. It is likely to be painful in the beginning given the all time accommodation of immigrants in the country but time has changed and even the immigrants may have their preferences changed. In respect of sovereignty of states, however, it is not impossible if governments of both the countries have political will plus mutual respect to the problems of each other. In the long run it pays off and strengthens the feeling of national identity and sovereignty among citizens of both countries. To reiterate an author (Lamm, 1997:114) who in referring to Rocky Mountain situation the US stated but appears equally applicable in the context of Nepal “*as conditions change, so should our policy change. It is time to close down the age of immigration. It is time to control our demography.*”

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Dr. Harka Gurung's Contribution in Physical Geography

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Contribution

Dr. Gurung had a large number of published and unpublished books, atlas, monographs, articles/papers and travelogues, paintings and drawings. A complete and systematic record of all his contributions has still to be developed. However, attempt has been made to prepare a list of his contributions so far reported in his books and articles. Based on the information so far available, Dr. Gurung had written more than 29 books including atlas, 16 monographs and 30 articles (Table 1). Some of the books and monographs are the compilation of many articles and travelogues. For example, there are 37 articles/papers compiled in one book – *Vishaya Vividh* published by Himal Book, Himal Association in 2006. Similarly, there are 9 articles/papers in one monograph – *Mountain Reflections: Pattern and Development* published by Mandala Publications in 2004. Those articles/papers published in books and monographs are not counted here in Table 1. If these articles/papers are also included, it shows that Dr. Gurung had written more than 80 articles/papers/books on different themes.

Table 1. Number of Contributions by Type of Documents

SN	Type	Total	Percentage
1	Post-Graduate Diploma Dissertation	1	1.2
2	Ph.D. Thesis	1	1.2
3	Book	29	34.9
4	Monograph	16	19.3
5	Article	30	36.1
6	Book Review	6	7.2
	Total	83	100.0

Dr. Gurung's contribution in different fields was driven by his job assignments in different fields. When he worked as Lecturer in the Tribhuvan University, his academic contribution was focused in physical geography. He had 12 contributions on physical geography especially on geomorphology before 1971 (Table 2). In between 1971 and 1980, he joined National Planning Commission, as Minister of Education and Tourism, and contributed more on social and tourism sectors. After he joined Population Institute, University of Hawaii as a Visiting Fellow and he focused his work on population, environment and development.