CONTOURS OF HIGH-ALTITUDE MOUNTAINEERING IN CONTEMPORARY NEPAL

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Abstract

Climbing Sherpas have been a crucial part of the adventurous yet perilous high-altitude mountaineering pursuits in the Himalaya. Growing commercialization after the groundbreaking 1953 Everest ascent has led to unprecedented changes in the ethnic Sherpa identity as well as the mountaineering industry in Nepal, of which Mount Everest is an integral part. Drawing on an ethnographic study in 2019, 2020 and 2024 in Nepal, the present article explores the contours of the climbing vocation in contemporary Nepal. The findings reveal that ethnic Sherpas have claimed more pronounced roles as international mountain guides, base camp managers and tourism outfitters. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in participation from non-Khumbu Sherpas and non-Sherpas in Nepali mountaineering thus paving the way for diversity within the industry. This article explores the dangers of working on the mountains, and delves into the unparalleled changes that have taken place in the last seventy years within Nepalese mountain climbing and in the lives of the climbing sherpas, including what the profession entails.

Keywords: Sherpa, mountain, Nepal, climbing, adventure

Introduction

Mountaineering is an extreme adventure sport where the probability of the participant dying or getting badly injured is high, as one faces immense forces of nature in one of the most remote and inhospitable locations (Laver, Pengas & Mei–Dan, 2017; Immonen et al., 2018). In high-altitude mountaineering factors such as altitude-induced illness, lack of oxygen, crevasses, strong gales and avalanches can be catastrophic. The Sherpa, which is an ethnic group of Nepal, have eked out a living from climbing since the time they were first hired as porters in the twentieth century. Ever since, they have been the forerunners in Himalayan mountaineering. Even today, the term “sherpa” is confused with mountain porter in the common parlance, as was in the past when they were often addressed as coolies by members of foreign expedition teams (Conway, 1894;

Herzog, 1954; Younghusband, 1926). The British used the term 'coolies,' to describe servant-master relationship for local highlanders who disbursed waged manual labour (Saha, 2020), by moving the loads on the mountains. From the early days of British reconnaissance, the term "sherpa" has evolved to become a role and a status term correlational to high-altitude climbers, and more recently to mountain guides (Shrestha, 2023; Ortner, 1999; Younghusband, 1936).[1] The article explores the contours of the "sherpa" vocation in contemporary Nepal, shedding light on the growing participation of non-Sherpas as high-altitude workforce. The article further provides insights into the structural transformation of the Nepali mountaineering industry.

Methodology

The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal that makes use of first-hand narratives of climbing sherpas to understand their lived experiences. The fieldwork was conducted in 2019 and 2020 in Solukhumbu and Kathmandu. The study adopts phenomenological approach to understand the unique subjective lived experiences of Nepali mountain climbers. For the purpose of the study, in-depth interviews and conversational interviewing were conducted with twenty-one local climbers. All were either climbers or lapsed climbers. In addition to carrying out semi-structured interviews, in the analysis of the data, I relied upon unstructured interviews and conversations with climbing sherpas on different occasions. The interviews with some Nepali high-altitude climbers spanned several days, months and years. All interviews were conducted in English and Hindi, however, some participants mixed Hindi and Nepali language. Informed consent was taken before each interview. All interviews were audio recorded, and were transcribed, translated, and thematically analyzed.

Changes in the Sherpa identity: Who are Sherpas?

To resolve the ambiguity surrounding the term "sherpa", it is imperative that the ethnicity question be brought into the debate so as to delimit the complex interplay of ethnic identity and occupational roles traditionally named after the Sherpa ethnic group.

The Sherpa, also Sher-wa (easterners), were originally the descendants of Tibetans who migrated to Nepal from the region of Salmo Gang of the Kham province of Tibet in the

[1] See Francis Younghusband, *Everest: The Challenge* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936), "They have become much more than mere bearers of loads: they have developed into real mountaineers" (p. 129).

sixteenth century. While the Sherpa history is obscure, the closest historical record on the Sherpa ethnic community is traced back to Oppitz's work where he posits that the first ancestors of the Sherpa immigrated to the then uninhabited region of eastern Nepal, Solu-Khumbu, around 1533 (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964; Oppitz, 1968). They lived in relative isolation in the upper Himalaya in the valleys and mountains surrounding the Everest massif, whereas some settled down in the Eastern region of Makalu, and some lived farther west in the Rolwaling valley (*The Sherpas*, n.d.) before spreading out to other areas including the lower Himalayas and valleys at lower elevation (Hagen et al., 1963). From traditionally a three-way economy resting on cultivation, livestock breeding and trade, as Furer-Haimendorf (1977) and Brower (1991) pointed out, ethnic Sherpas gradually established themselves in mountaineering, trekking and the tourism industry.

The seeds of modern mountaineering in Nepal were sown during the British-led Great Trigonometric Survey of their territory in the 1800s that extended into the Himalaya. In the early twentieth century, local highlanders began being recruited as porters on expeditions. Sherpas were employed on these Himalayan expeditions to carry heavy items that included mountaineering equipment, ropes, oxygen cylinders, tents, food supplies and personal items of the clients. Agriculture did not yield as much income as expeditions did which was why most Sherpas were eager to find themselves expedition work. The money earned through one expedition was sufficient for them to take care of their families for an entire year. Since expedition recruitment occurred in Darjeeling in India, many Sherpas travelled from Nepal to Darjeeling to land jobs in expeditions (Younghusband, 1926). Sherpas have remained an inextricable part of high-altitude mountaineering (Ortner, 1999), and have successfully transitioned into certified international mountain guides proficient in mountaineering and technical climbing including rock climbing, snow craft, and ice climbing. Today, ethnic Sherpas have taken up more elaborate positions of base camp managers and tourism outfitters on Himalayan expeditions where they assist clients [members] and supervise expeditions, leading a meticulous team of high-altitude porters, cooks, assistant guide and guide on the mountain (Oh, 2016).

Since a large proportion of local men working on Himalayan expeditions belonged to the Sherpa ethnicity, the word "Sherpa" earned a professionalized connotation in a manner that "Sherpa without mountaineering [came to be] regarded as half empty, and mountaineering without Sherpa [as] full empty" (Shrestha, 2023), and as such the term "Sherpa" came to be used as an occupational referent (Ortner, 1999) to refer to all support climbers, high-altitude porters, and assistant guides who assisted the local guide on an expedition. Even today, an assistant guide is unofficially addressed as sherpa

across expedition agencies, however it remains a recognized occupational category across the trekking sector (Shrestha, 2023). Consequently, the word "Sherpa" got a professionalized connotation, and the role of high-altitude porter, initially associated with ethnic Sherpas, came to be addressed as "sherpa" for anyone, irrespective of ethnic identity, working on the mountain as high-altitude porter in the capacity of assistant guide, cook or guide but it is mostly identified with the rank of assistant guide within the industry by the local workforce. The term "climbing sherpa" has been used throughout the text to refer to the Nepali mountain climbing workforce regardless of their occupational rank and ethnic origins. However, when specifically referring to ethnic Sherpas, the initial "S" has been capitalized, to distinguish it from the role category of "sherpa."

Metamorphosis of the mountaineering industry in Nepal

Tourism in Nepal has flourished by leaps and bounds. An unprecedented rise in the number of people coming from different countries was recorded after the Lukla airstrip was built (Fisher, 1990). Those who had worked on foreign expeditions as porters or Sherpas converted their houses into tea shops, lodges, and homestays for tourists. The ripple effect caused by the commercialization of climbing poured large streams of money into Solukhumbu, and people who had business along the main trails or intersections—viz. Lukla, Namche, Khumjung, Tengboche, Dingboche, and Pangboche—prospered (Norgay, 2014). Mountain tourism has been a major contributor to Nepal's economy (McCurdy, 2013) since it is believed to have regulated employment-generation and yielded higher incomes and earnings from foreign currency. Nepal's tourism industry is intimately tied to mountain climbing.

The Nepalese mountaineering industry alone has rapidly transformed in the last twenty years with training institutes including Khumbu Climbing Centre (KCC), the National Mountains Instructors Association (NMIA), and the Nepal National Mountain Guide Association (NNMGA) opening up in the first decade of the 2000s. Moreover, NNMGA, a member country representative of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association (IFMGA), alternatively known by its French and German abbreviations UIAGM[2] and IVBV,[3] was registered in 2005, and was finally accepted as a candidate member of the IFMGA in 2012. IFMGA mountains guides—

[2] UIAGM is the French abbreviation for Union Internationale des Associations de Guides de Montagnes.

[3] IVBV is German abbreviation for Internationale Vereinigung der Bergführerverbande.

Lakpa Sherpa and Ngawang Sherpa, recalled their struggle with designing the most suitable curriculum for the course,

> *The syllabus we designed was scrapped by IFMGA several times. The NNMGA approached the French mountaineering foundation, which suggested improvements. The association was required to choose a parent country, and we decided to approach France, given its long history of alpine climbing. We ameliorated the syllabus and after some time we finally had Nepal included as a member country of IFMGA.* (Personal communication, January 2020)

Since IFMGA guides have the license to train and guide applicants from across the world, they have access to better opportunities and better pay as compared to their non-IFMGA counterparts. Nepal's approval as an IFMGA candidate has further strengthened its case of producing some of the extremely skilled and trained mountain guides in the world. Jyamchang Bhote said,

> *I am looking forward to attending the refresher course after three years which will allow me to renew my license. With an IFMGA license, I can work everywhere, in any country. I can climb the Alps and guide teams.* (Personal communication, November 27, 2019)

Jyamchang is now an international mountain guide and finds opportunities to work on the Alps and in the Antarctic following his meticulous IFMGA training over the years. The training lasts five years, with years of experience in the field being a prerequisite. It is mandatory for climbing sherpas to undergo training at one or more of these institutions in order to find better work. The costliest of all the trainings is the IFMGA training provided by NNMGA. A five-year course costs about USD 10,000 to USD 25,000, which many find difficult to arrange but still doable as most Sherpa guides earn between USD 6,000 and USD 10,000 in one Everest season. Till date, Nepal has produced seventy IFMGA guides as of March 2021, out of which one is a female. In Holt's (2008) words, Himalayan mountaineering has from the 1930s become "an international contest, and a national mission for well-organized and well-funded expeditions." Many climbing sherpas have become successful expedition managers and organizers. Pemba Sherpa owns an expedition company in Kathmandu and runs luxury (or VVIP "very very important persons") expeditions. Pemba hails from a small village in Okhaldunga, and was one of the actors in the 2015 historical adventure film *Everest*, directed by Baltasar Kormakur. Besides acting in a few documentaries, he has led Hollywood actors and international fashion models to the Everest Base Camp. However, like most others, Pemba too had toiled in arduousness for years working as

porter, and later, as kitchen cook and assistant guide on various expeditions.

Other prominent companies run by foreigners and Nepalis also offer luxury expeditions wherein they fly in their clients from Kathmandu to Namche in a helicopter, altogether neglecting the Lukla airstrip where trekkers otherwise look around for porters to carry their luggage to Namche and beyond. To further entice foreign clients, expedition agencies employ one or more IFMGA guides, a photographer, or may even offer a preparatory expedition to the summit of Lobuche Peak ahead of Everest summit. Luxury expeditions focus on scarce walking and more helicopter flights wherever necessary, hot showers in the base camp, a variety of imported cuisine, etc. but it comes at a price of nearly USD 150,000.

Tourism industry is the major source of revenue for the Government of Nepal, and a large part of it is earned from the mountain royalty collected on Everest and other mountains by the Department of Tourism (DoT) in Nepal. Mountaineering forms the very basis of the multi-million-dollar adventure tourism industry of Nepal (Crockett, 2020), yet the fatality rate on Everest and other 8000 m peaks (Herzog, 1954; McClung, 2016; Tenzing, 1955; UIAA, 2018) continues to jostle the climbing fraternity.

We do not know whether we are going to come back or die

Mountaineering continues to be a perilous sport. K2 and Annapurna-I have earned the reputation of being dreadful, with Annapurna-I considered to be the deadliest mountain at a fatality rate of over 30 percent (Salisbury et al., 2021). K2, also called the 'Savage Mountain'—a term made famous by climber George Bell due to its technical difficulty and higher fatality rate (Stone, 2018), comes only second to Annapurna-I. Climbing sherpas participate in activities related to load-carrying, guiding clients and organizing large-scale expeditions. High-altitude mountaineering is performed at an elevation above 6000 m. At 7000 m and above, the body starts shutting down. This is because no human body can acclimatize in the death zone, where the body ends up using oxygen faster than it can replenish (Kellas, 1917). A protracted stay at altitude over 8000 m is likely to result in irreversible mountain sickness causing sudden deterioration of organs, deceptive illusions, and ultimately, demise. Aside from acute mountain sickness crevasse falls, rock falls, avalanches, frigid conditions and incessant snowfall in high camps make up for common causes of death.

Climbing sherpas, as a part of the high-altitude workforce, are responsible for setting up of the campsite, managing porters, fixing ropes, liaising with clients, carrying loads, cooking, serving hot water, and bringing down trash and dead bodies, often putting

their lives at risk in the process. Despite this, climbing sherpas continue to work on the mountains primarily for better livelihood but also because some of them find meaning in their actions as passionate mountain climbers (Shrestha, 2023; Personal communication, October 2019 to June 2024). Kearl (1989) conceptualized work in relation to the identity of an individual. He explains how work becomes central to an individual's identity and how individuals, in turn, are defined by their work. Despite having close encounters with near-death experiences, Anup Gurung, an IFMGA guide, continues to work at higher altitudes. He says,

> *We work in very dificult and unpredictable terrains… We run a very high risk of being hit by an avalanche or rockfalls. Sometimes when I am working on the glacier, a landslide hits, or sometimes a massive piece of ice breaks and passes very close by me. In these moments, I feel scared and very bad but I still enjoy doing this work. In fact, I am happy doing it. I cannot work in the ofice. The very idea bugs me—same timing, same laptops, same ofice, same chair! It is boring. During climbing, we regularly meet new clients and make new friends. This job keeps me alive.* (Personal communication, January 15, 2020)

The fear of death does not keep Anup and several other climbing sherpas from participating in high-altitude mountaineering, as long as it renders financial, social and psychological satisfaction to them. This is consistent with Kearl's (1989) assertion of symbolic death which occurs as a result of losing one's work. Mountaineering remains an unpredictable adventure. Even though Khumbu Icefall is in a constant state of motion and many have succumbed to their death in this section, Nepali mountaineers cross it over a dozen times in a single expedition, supplying essentials, and setting up camps (Arnette, 2017; Benavides, 2021; Starmer, 1995). In an interview with an Icefall doctor, Paljor Sherpa narrates,

> *Khumbu Icefall is in a state of constant motion—it moves every day. The ice sinks low, and crevasses open up. If we make a route today, it changes tomorrow. If an avalanche damages the route, we make the way again. These days with superior-quality equipment, Icefall doctors are not much worried about the dangers but it continues to be extremely dangerous.* (Personal communication, December 12, 2019)

Paljor worked as an Icefall doctor and recently quit the job on Everest. The Khumbu Icefall stretch between 5,500 meters and 5,800 meters (Arnette, 2017) on the South-East ridge approach to Mount Everest has gained notoriety over the years for its increasing death toll. In the words of Starmer (1995), Khumbu Icefall is a "spectacular

cascade of giant crevasses, tottering seracs and shattered blocks of ice—the sort of features that are always related to fast-moving glaciers" (p. 110). Later, Paljor resigned from the Icefall team due to low pay, approximately NRs. 4,00,000 per season, when weighed against the exorbitant risks.

When Phurba Sherpa was asked if he had ever thought of climbing Annapurna-I, he laughed: "*No! It would kill us.*" Likewise, Kami Rita explains what it is like to climb mountains every single time,

> *The life of climbing sherpas is uncertain as that of the soldiers going to war. One never knows whether they will come back to their families. A mountain climber's life is held by the same predicament*. *We have to live in uncertainties.* (Personal communication, June 18, 2019)

Kami Rita Sherpa, who holds the world record for most ascents to Mount Everest, also cringed when thoughts about his children working on the mountains struck him. He said that he would rather encourage his children to work in some other profession but not as a climbing sherpa. He explains his abnegation,

> *I am giving them good education so they can engage themselves in easy business. They do not have to chase the mountaineering or trekking industry*. (Personal communication, June 18, 2019)

Echoes of stiff discontentment within the mountaineering profession reverberated throughout the climbing industry. Phurba Sherpa of the fixing team and Pasang Dava Sherpa, a freelancer, who works as an assistant guide with one company and as a guide with another, were scared to send their children to work in the precarious environment that mountains offer. Chhidar Lama seasonally does glacial guiding in Norway. When asked if she would like her son to join the climbing industry, she articulated,

> *It is a personal choice but I prefer tourism industry over climbing. There is no harm in getting some climbing experience, still I would not like my son to work in the mountaineering industry, especially in Nepal where no social security is given to the climber upon retirement or injury. What if he encounters some serious injury such as a broken leg? His whole life will come to an end*. (Personal communication, November 15, 2019)

At present, most climbing sherpas have moved to the city of Kathmandu which helps them explore opportunities within the mountaineering industry, as well as provide their children with a better access to education. Of all the climbing sherpas interviewed, none of them wanted their children to carry forward the legacy of their profession as

they did not see a secure future in mountaineering. This was because high-altitude mountaineering has serious perils, and it fails to provide social security to the families (Sharma & Mashal, 2023).

A common thread that spanned all of my conversations with the climbing sherpas was climate change, and how it was affecting snow and glaciers on the mountains thus making it more dangerous and technical. The melting of ice has exposed slippery rocks which make any climb technical and onerous (Khadka, 2019). Serac failures and avalanches due to shifting of ice continue to claim the lives of many climbers (Climbing sherpas, personal communication, June 2019 to June 2024), with most frequent reasons for death on the mountain being fall, avalanche, Altitude Mountains Sickness (AMS), crevasse fall, exhaustion, and exposure (frostbite) (Salisbury & Hawley, 2011). However, over time climbing has become relatively dependable for members as everything from cutting ice, carving out routes, laying ropes and transporting luggage (which includes clients' personal belongings including water bottle and oxygen canisters) to preparing tents and food, is carried out by a team of skilled climbing sherpas (Arnette, 2017; Arnette, 2024, Ortner, 1999; Younghusband, 1934; Pasang Lama, personal communication, January 6, 2020). This is especially true for Everest climbs where people do not need particular skills for a high-altitude mountain climb (Gollom, 2019), except for the lavish money that must be paid to the expedition agencies (Jenkins, 2022). The more one pays, the better facilities one gets in the base camp in terms of hot shower, television, exquisite local and imported foods and drinks, coffee machines, comfortable chairs, soft bedding, and heater. The utterly dangerous work, however, is carried out by the local high-altitude workforce. It is only on Everest expeditions that there is a dedicated team of Icefall doctors and rope fixing. The former is employed by Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC), and the latter that includes only experienced climbers, are hired from among expedition groups at the start of the climbing season. Once ropes are laid out, members have to wear their safety anchor and climb up the ropes along a well-defined route. The Icefall doctor looks for any unusual pattern in Khumbu Icefall, and together they are responsible for laying aluminum ladders over some vicious and bottomless crevasses across the Khumbu Icefall (Nestler, 2023), the deadliest center on South Side of Mount Everest, to facilitate crossing from the base camp to Camp I. More money is paid for the weight as it is ferried on the higher camps, and most local climbers cannot or rather do not leave their clients to fend for themselves even when they sense danger.

With unpredictable weather on higher altitudes, mountaineering continues to remain an extreme activity incredibly challenging to perform (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019). On 8000 m peaks, most climbers have perished in the death zone.[4] Dozens of dead bodies lie buried under a thick layer of snow, serving as distinguishable landmarks, and climbing sherpas have perished on the mountains (Preiss, 2018; Benavides, 2024; Lamichhane et al., 2022) trying to save the lives of their clients and fellow climbers, in a way standing between death and their clients.

Transmigration-a way out

Appadurai's (1996) understanding of globalization as intersecting with migration is one of imagination that individuals turn to in their everyday lives. People imagine their children living in places that seem to offer immense possibilities. Such imagination which has become a collective, social fact has caused people to migrate in sizable numbers in search of opportunities and wealth, more so to escape drudgery and wretched conditions that life has to offer in their current circumstances. In an endeavor to explain the new global economy, he enlists *ethnoscape* as a significant landscape of the imagined world where individuals in the capacity of guest workers, refugees, tourists, exiles and immigrants move between nations. In light of this context, Nepali mountaineers seek temporary or permanent migration to the United States and throughout Europe, South Asia and Gulf countries often as tourists, guest workers or immigrants. The multiple opportunities that mountaineering industry has created since 1953 for ethnic Sherpas have given them a chance to consider migrating to developed countries for various reasons including their children's education. They have unrelentingly moved abroad—India, the Gulf countries, and the US in particular. In the past, nevertheless, since the recruitment for Himalayan reconnaissance and mountaineering expeditions was carried out in India, many Sherpas moved from Solukhumbu to permanently settle in Darjeeling and Sikkim in order to provide for their families. The scope of this paper does not allow me to go into the background of Sherpa men and women migrating to the Gulf countries on the basis of domestic employment, etc.; however, most Sherpas working on higher ranks have eventually moved to the US, leaving behind in Nepal a shrinking population of ethnic Sherpa.

In the present scenario, Sherpas have become globally recognized for their climbing skills, and this, in turn, has led to foreign sponsorships pouring in mostly from the

[4] Death zone is typically at an altitude above 8,000 meters or 26,000 feet above sea level. Survival in death zone becomes excruciatingly impossible as it kills one minute by minute if one stays there for too long. Due to insufficient pressure of oxygen in the atmosphere, the rate of deterioration of the human body is exponential at this altitude.

United States and the United Kingdom, among other European countries like Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria, Italy, France, etc. Ang Dendi Sherpa worked as a trekking guide earlier before he moved to Spain to live with his sister. Ngima Lama worked for almost eight years in the tourism sector. He first worked as an all-rounder assistant guide and porter for two years, and later as trekking guide for six years doing mostly 6,000 m peaks and high passes. He explained,

> *I have worked in different sectors over the years. Right out of school, I wanted to join the British Army, however, as I am the eldest child, I had to ensure my family had enough. So, I started working on small treks as porter. Other than this, I have worked in a bank and also as Math and Accountancy tutor for grades ninth till twelfth. But I wanted to have better earnings, so I moved to Kuwait where I worked at the international airport. Soon I realized I did not want to have a job in a nine-to-five work schedule. I terribly missed the mountains. I returned to Nepal and started trekking again—I still have my heart out there [in trekking and climbing].* (Personal communication, June 2022)

In between (during off-seasons), he worked in logistics company as bike driver to sustain his living in Kathmandu. After a long wait of almost two years, Ngima finally joined his wife in Portugal. When I asked him why he was going to Portugal, he explained to me that they plan to stay there until they get a visa for either Canada or the US, for it was easier to get an American visa from Portugal rather than from Nepal. Sherpas' temporary engagement as laborers in the Gulf, South Asia and Europe has caused a spur in migration figures recently. Other Nepalis too have been lured by better economic prospects in countries like Qatar, Kuwait, Malaysia, South Korea, Spain, Italy, Turkey, Portugal or Austria (Sijapati & Limbu, 2017). Phurba Sherpa too worked as trekking guide, but his stint as factory worker in Malaysia left him with bitter feelings of betrayal. Phurba explained,

> *I came across an agency in Nepal that offered a job in Malaysia on a two-year contract. I paid NRs. 1,40,000. When I reached Malaysia, I was asked by a company representative to give an impression of my index finger. As soon as I did that, my passport was taken away and I was told that I would get it after the contract was over. I had no other option but to continue working for the company at a salary that was much lower than promised. I escaped after 8 months and stayed as illegal migrant because I was without a passport now. Then I worked in the city of Johor Bahru at a Chinese 'fing' noodle factory for three months but earned better there. In Malaysia illegal immigrants can earn more money.* (Personal communication, December 3, 2019)

At present, Phurba is working at a foundry (metal factory) in Turkey and is joined by his other Sherpa friends there. Most high-altitude climbers prefer to move to a developed country which promises them with better livelihoods. Migration to these countries, for a large part, depends on the kind of reciprocal relationships local climbers have with their clients. Climbing sherpas take an exceptional care of their clients while guiding them to the top of a mountain, and in turn members have to ensure that their guides and staff are treated equally. The reciprocal friendship thus helps Nepalis in winning a sponsorship by their foreign clients who are willing to invite them to visit their country and work temporarily during off-seasons. This relationship of reciprocity is closely tied in the *zhindak* principle of the Sherpa culture. Z*hindak* refers to a benevolent protector who takes a lesser person under his wing and helps him/her to succeed. A *zhindak* figure acquires his power through the person dependent upon him, and so there is an absence of hierarchy in the very idea. The principle of *zhindak* operating on egalitarian grounds never let Sherpas take up a servile role. As Ortner (1999) notes, even though Sherpas were subservient, they did not gain favor by flattery as they believe that to oblige to their *zhindak* is not to subordinate themselves. The relationship between *zhindak* and Sherpa, therefore, is that of mutual respect and devotion in which the roles of *zhindak* and Sherpa can be reversed over time, paving the way for equality. The *zhindak* relationship found between Sherpa and his client is illustrated in Phurba Tenjing Sherpa's case

> *I worked for almost two years in Austria and then part-time in a hotel in the Alps. This was made possible by my client who I helped climb Mount Pumori in 2006. We are like father-son. My job in Austria included cooking, washing utensils, and servicing the customers. I worked for six months for two consecutive years in Austria, and then in 2012 started my expedition company called Dreamer Destination Treks and Expedition. I decided to concentrate on my company, so quit working there. I am today running a successful expedition company. I visit Austria, represent my company and share my experiences of working as a mountaineer.* (Personal communication, December 1, 2019)

A similar experience was narrated by Dendi Sherpa who works as an assistant Sherpa. His brother, who is a climbing guide, was able to find a sponsor and is now living and working in the United States in a hotel. Dendi exclaims sentimentally,

I am working in the mountains. I believe that someday I will get a chance to move abroad. My family is not happy with me climbing but my brother is living a good life there. His sponsor helped him. He earns well and has built his own house in the US. (Personal communication, December 15, 2019)

> In the United States, a large section of the Sherpa diaspora today resides in the city of New York, particularly in the boroughs of Queens. Sherpa immigrants have initiated prominent organizations or *kyidug* (community, social support network) across New York, Colorado, Seattle and California in the States to serve a variety of purposes including climbing, and preservation of indigenous culture and language. Pasang Sherpa and Serap Sherpa now working in the US recall their experiences as climbing guides from Everest climbs while driving taxi and working as a sales associate at an outdoors shop in Manhattan—job roles that starkly differ from their previous occupation of high-altitude Himalayan mountaineering. Pasang had also taken part in a perilous search-and-rescue mission where he saved two people stranded for more than two hours on Everest, but loves his 'new home' as it is not dangerous (Storey & Donnelly, 2014).

Most climbing sherpas (sardars, guides) who had climbed Everest a number of times, arrive in the US on a tourist visa usually sponsored by their American clients from expeditions and treks. But after the visa lapses, they continue living in the US illegally, mostly working as taxi drivers or as waiters in the hotel industry. They also find jobs at outdoor gear shops or in a restaurant. Baldwin-Edwards (2008) understand illegal migration as one bearing "an analogy with illegal flows of capital in the early 20th century, and with the smuggling of goods, which is a centuries-old activity and still flourishing" (p. 1449). The case of climbing sherpas in the US who overstay their visa and avoid returning to Nepal coincides with Papademetriou's (2005) identification of common forms of illegal migration including undocumented immigration, visa overstaying (individuals who tend to overstay their period of legal stay), and violation of the terms and conditions of a visa (those individuals that enter legally but violate one or more terms and conditions of their visa). In order to go unnoticed by the police, they engage themselves in the unorganized sector sometimes even moonlighting (working a second job), mixing formal and informal work.

Lee's (1966) theory of migration suggested factors responsible for pushing people out of their area of origin along with pull factors that attracted individuals to leave behind their native areas and migrate. The prevalence of strong social networks and social capital at the place of destination incite a growing number of climbing sherpas, especially Khumbu Sherpas, to migrate to New York and Colorado that are witnesses to a growing Sherpa diaspora. Massey (1987) describes social capital as the tangible and intangible resources that individuals acquire through their family, friends or *paisanos* (countryman) already residing in the host country. When more and more people

migrate from the same community to a particular place, social capital accumulates, which in turn eases the process of migration and makes it less costly (Massey, 1993; Flores-Yeffal, 2015). The intention behind international migration may not only be to increase absolute income and minify risk, but also to augment income relative to other climbing sherpas within their reference group. Massey et al. (1993) ascertained "as a household's sense of relative deprivation increases, so does the motivation to migrate" (p. 451). The expanding network of intricate social contacts within the Sherpa community make the overall process of migration less intimidating because they feel socially integrated by similar work, religion and native place, conditions prevalent in a society demonstrating Durkheim's mechanical solidarity.

Conclusion

From being recognized as porters and support climbers, the ethnic Khumbu Sherpas are today known for their extraordinary mountaineering skills, and continue to dominate the Nepali mountaineering industry. However, as an increasing number of Khumbu Sherpas abandon mountaineering to work in the tourism sector or migrate to western countries, a significant number of non-Khumbu Sherpas and other ethnic groups from neighboring regions, particularly Makalu, Rolwaling, Okhaldunga and Solu comprise the high-altitude workforce. The opening of major training centres across Nepal have further made it easier for the local population to have access to mountain training thus churning out better jobs within the sector.

As an extreme sport, mountaineering has a high mortality rate, making it more challenging. Young and middle-aged Nepalis continue to work in mountaineering because it is the only occupation in Nepal that offers substantial financial rewards. The financial returns from a single expedition, especially on Everest, far exceeds the income they could make in any other occupation. Climbing gives them ample time to connect with foreigners, some of whom become their good friends and even sponsors (*zhindak*: a patron or protector, who would help a lesser person to succeed), and local high-altitude workers enter into father-son-like relations with them (Adams, 1996; Ortner, 1999). Thus, climbing sherpas locate prestige in mountaineering as it infuses them with confidence and ego that make up for the parlous nature of climbing.

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