

Research Report

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Organization (at the time of the grant): The University of Tokyo

Title of Research: A Case Study of the Nepali Migration from Malma Village to Japan

Purpose of Research: (400 words)

The purpose of my research is to examine the unique characteristics of Nepali migrants working as cooks in Indian curry restaurants in Japan. The category of "skilled labor (cook)" in Japanese immigration law provided the basis for Nepali migrants to work legally in Indian curry restaurants in Japan. There are already more than 3000 Nepali-owned Indian curry restaurants in Japan, including 500 Nepali restaurants in Tokyo, alone. Recently, Nepali restaurants have been spreading rapidly to smaller towns in Japan such as Abashiri in Hokkaido and the rate of Nepali migration to Japan has risen accordingly. Surprisingly, more than 1800 Nepalis have migrated to Japan from Malma, a rural Nepali village of 6400 residents, to work in Nepali restaurants within the last few years. Nowadays the local people have nicknamed their village 'Little Japan', as so many people from the village are working in Japan and sending back a huge amount of remittances. However, the process of migration is still difficult. Each of these migrants paid US\$ 15,000 to agent to get work visa to enter Japan. By conducting multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork both in Japan as well in Nepal this research will answer the following questions:

- How have so many Nepalis from Malma village have been able to migrate in Japan? Why did they decide to migrate to Japan even though they had to pay US\$15,000, and how could they afford to pay this money
- What have been the social consequences for their lives, their families, and their villages since they migrated to Japan?
- What kinds of social relationships did they develop with the larger Japanese society?
- What are the impacts of the remittances on their families and the village at the micro and macro levels?

Nepali migration to Japan is a relatively recent phenomenon; however it has been increasing rapidly within the last few years. Nepalis immigrants in Japan have increased by 29.4% from about 42,346 in 2014 to 54,346 in 2015, making them the largest South Asian community in the country. Despite the rapid growth, the Nepalis are perhaps the least understood of all of Japan's immigrant minorities. In this context, my research result provides an opportunity for Japanese as well as global society to understand better the Nepali immigrants' situation in contemporary Japan. The research is original because it investigates the emerging phenomenon of Nepali immigration to Japan which may be useful in the formulation of comprehensive policies that would allow Japan and other countries to benefit from transnational migration. In addition, academically this research is important as it explore the causes, processes, and social consequences of Nepali migration to Japan with the status of "skilled labor (cook)" which may be useful in the development of migration theory.

Content/Methodology of Research: (800 words)

Field research for this dissertation was carried out in Japan and Nepal intermittently from December 2008 to September 2017, utilizing a video camera as a primary research tool to document both Nepali immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal. The result is a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), based on ethnographic audio-visual data on both local and transnational activities. In the context of migration studies, I have been inspired by Watson (1975; 1979), who advocated the necessity to investigate the people and their families on both sides (Watson 1979: 2-4), and who actually conducted fieldwork both in Hong Kong and the UK in his own research on Chinese migration to the UK.

Methodologically, this dissertation is original in combining filming with conventional ethnography, suggesting ideas about how visual research methods can be applied to the study of transnational migration. After I studied visual anthropology at Tromsø University, Norway, I was inspired to apply filming techniques to scientific research. In my studies at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University and The University of Tokyo, I learned anthropological and sociological approaches to the issue of political, economical and socio-cultural globalization throughout the world. In this research, I applied a methodology which blends ethnography with visual research methods to study transnational migration. I used my camera to connect Nepali restaurant workers in Japan and their families in Nepal and explore their experiences of everyday life based on Geertz's reconceptualization of seeing things "from the native point of view" (1983) in the context of transnational migration. Geertz also emphasizes that an ethnographer should provide "thick description" (1973). He points out:

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement— what manner of men are these? (1973: 16)

In this respect it is important to note that the camera helped me record ethnographic footage of Nepali immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal, which provides a base for writing thick descriptions of their local and transnational activities. The ethnographic footage provides information about their lives through their own voices and activities, based on their understandings of their world, which may not be possible with verbal records alone. Furthermore, following Sarah Pink (2001), I was able to record in moving images the full actuality of things for which words are inadequate (Bateson and Mead 1942): cooking skills and techniques, the details of the *nan* making processes, techniques for using the hot oven, the workers' conversation and social life around the kitchen areas, and their emotions, feeling, friendships and hostilities and passing sympathies and dislikes. All of these could be recorded by my video camera, enhancing my understanding of social situations in restaurants.

While conducting fieldwork, the visual method also helped me to develop rapport with immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal. I recorded film of Nepali immigrants' lives in Japan and screened it on my laptop for their family members in Nepal. While screening, I observed their reactions to the video and filmed that as well. Similarly, I recorded the lives of the migrants' families in Nepal and screened that for my informants in Japan. I found these video screenings were very useful to evoke comments, memories, and discussions that also provided a very useful understanding of the immigrants' previous backgrounds, their social networks, and the migration process. I therefore used the visual techniques both as a medium of enquiry and communication with informants, and as a way of obtaining more information from them.

The camera also provided me with great opportunities to increase my understanding through the process

of reviewing, together with informants, film recorded in different social settings in Japan and Nepal. During my fieldwork, I managed to review important footage with informants at times, which helped me obtain a more complete idea of a particular situation. In addition, after the fieldwork, transcribing data from ethnographic footage to text gave me another opportunity to refresh my memory by reviewing films of my informants, including their social spaces and activities in different social situations. The essential point is that if I had had no camera, I could not have reviewed the situations I had observed. Certainly, transcribing more than 600 hours of ethnographic footage into text was very time-consuming and took me several months. However, through the process, I learned much about the correspondence between film and ethnographic notes on the one hand, and between ethnographic film and monograph on the other (Omori 1988).

Beside visual research method, I collected data using in-depth interview methods by utilizing Creswell's concept of qualitative inquiry (2012), talking directly with the immigrants, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell their stories. I have conducted research in at-least 30 Nepali restaurants in Japan (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Oita and Hokkaido) to document their restaurant business. I also made 15 case studies and 40 in-depth interviews with Nepali restaurants workers in Japan and their families in Nepal. In addition, I have conducted 20 in-depth interview with Japanese people who are interconnected to Nepali immigrants' community.

Conclusion/Observation (400 words)

Based on my eight-year long multi-sited visual ethnographic fieldwork at both ends of the migration chain, in the migrants' place of origin and their destination, this research has explored the causes, processes and consequences of Nepali migration from Malma to Japan and demonstrated the complex relationship between social networks, migration and social change, focusing on transnational ties. The result of this research should be seen as an attempt to understand the migration from Malma to Japan within a wider time frame. Historically speaking, Malma migrants have transformed themselves from peasants to *lahures* (army) and from *lahures* to cooks and beyond. Until the 1980s, the majority of young men were leaving the village to travel to India to become *lahures*, and remittances from *lahures* were perceived as the prime means of improving one's socio-economic position in the village. Malma became known as a *lahure* village. However, after the development of new social networks and forms of social capital from the early 1990s, the majority of the young people from the village have been working as cooks in Nepali restaurants in Japan, to the extent that the village is now locally known as "Little Japan". Their dreams of gaining social mobility have also been connected to Japan. By following the history of the village's foreign employment tradition, the research has demonstrated how the village has changed from a typical peasant community in the hills of Nepal to an emigrant community.