Nepali Youth in America: A Contemporary Look at Cultural Identity, Community, and Ties to "Home"

Megan Barrie
University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Recommended Citation
Nepali Youth in America: A Contemporary Look at Cultural Identity, Community, and Ties to “Home”

Megan Barrie

An undergraduate thesis submitted to the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of a
Bachelor of Arts Honors degree in Anthropology

Spring 2014

Thesis Advisor

Carole McGranahan | Department of Anthropology

Committee Members

Robin Bernstein | Department of Anthropology
Donna Goldstein | Department of Anthropology
Vijaya Sharma | Department of Economics
Abstract

Increasing numbers of students and families are migrating from Nepal and seeking education in the United States. In 2012, more than 670,000 international students were enrolled in American universities, 11,500 of which came directly from Nepal. As Nepalis continue to migrate, Nepal’s own need for development remains unaddressed, and youth are identified as the key to the country’s future. This study attempts to understand the challenges Nepali students face as students at American universities through piecing together various lived experiences and perspectives on their exodus and commitment to return to Nepal. In-depth interviews inform this study to understand ways in which Nepali students migrate, transition, form their identities, create communities, negotiate Nepali and American cultures, and inform their commitment to Nepal. This study concludes that Nepali youth in America today have diverse perspectives regarding their exodus and return, yet the uncertain future of Nepal’s political instability and job insecurity complicate students’ decisions.
Dedication

To Ayush. Thank you for your sincere friendship and willingness to share.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support, insight, and knowledge of the many people I have met along the way. Firstly, I would not be here without Mitch and Marcia Barrie whose constant love and support have given me the opportunity to study and pursue whatever I put my mind to. To all those Nepali students that gave me their time, I deeply thank you for sharing your personal experiences and opening up to me. I wish that I could name you all. Carole McGranahan, thank you for serving as my advisor and providing much needed guidance and encouragement throughout this entire process. Vijaya Sharma, Donna Goldstein, and Robin Bernstein, thank you for your willingness to support me and for your words of wisdom. I would not have been inspired to complete this project without the influence of mero Nepali pariwaar--ma tapaiharulaai Anita garchhu.
Table of Contents

Abstract
Dedication
Acknowledgments

Chapter I. Introduction
A. Context
B. Researcher’s Background

Chapter II. Research Methodology
A. Methods
B. Goals of the Study

Chapter III. History & Context
A. Nepal’s politics
B. Nepal’s economics
   i. “I’m sending money home”
   ii. Class and Caste
C. Nepal’s social context
   i. A Patriarchal System
   ii. Education
   iii. The “Brain Drain”
D. “Youth are the Key”

Chapter IV. Coming to America
A. Immigration
   i. “We came here for you”
   ii. The DV
B. Transitions
C. Diversity among Student Immigrants
D. Imagined Communities

Chapter V. Student Voices and Family Ties
A. Identity
B. Nationalism and Patriotism
C. Perceived Problems
   i. Losing Culture
   ii. Advice
D. Returning to Nepal
CHAPTER 1: Introduction
I. Introduction

Upon my return to the US after studying in Nepal, I found myself eagerly reaching out to my friend Prabin as a way to bring me back to the culture, the people, the food, and the customs of the country that I had called ‘home’ for five months. Prabin invited me along to celebrate dashain with his family and told me of the growing Nepali community in our college town that would be happy to offer me a homecooked meal of daal bhat whenever I felt I missed Nepal most. As we talked I expressed such excitement for his home country and culture, yet after minutes of me rambling on about the temples, my host family, the language, he finally could not help but ask, “What did you think of the roads? And the pollution? How about the bandhs? You didn’t study at a Nepali university—did you?” (Pokhrel 2014). All these questions, I realized, stemmed from Prabin’s own concerns about Nepal. While he agreed upon so many things about the beauty of his home, he opened up about the not so beautiful aspects:

Nepal has no structure, the government is unstable, and the education is bad unless you go to private school. The thing is, you need connections; everything is “under the table” and the more you pay, the better chance you have of coming to America. You know, there is a movement there. People want to leave. Twenty to twenty-six [year olds] are all gone—to Dubai, Australia, India, Europe—but if they returned, they could really change things. (Pokhrel 2014)

Prabin is just one of many first generation Nepali immigrant youth (aged 18-29) who have strong concerns about their home country. His commentary on the current state of his birthplace highlights many of the worries that Nepalis (both inside and outside of Nepal’s borders) have for the future of Nepal.

After meeting with Prabin I became curious. Do other Nepali immigrant youth have similar concerns? Prabin seemed to suggest that was the case. His comment, “if they [youth] returned, they could really change things” was also stuck in my mind. What did he and others of his generation think about the prospect of returning? What are their ties to Nepal? Before I could
delve into these questions, I began to look into what brought Prabin and other Nepali youth to the US in the first place to contextualize their migration.

A. Context

After Nepal’s borders opened in 1951 upon the end of the Rana rule, the landlocked country’s peoples slowly became exposed to Western ideologies of global politics including “development,” “modernity,” and “progress” (Pigg 1992: 491). Labeled by the United Nations as a developing nation, Nepal’s people suffer from a severe lack of access to proper healthcare, education, and infrastructure, all of which are inhibited by political instability and unequal and limited economic opportunities. As a natural consequence of Nepal’s open borders, information, goods, and people not only flowed into the developing country, but also began to find their way out through migration.

Immigration was slow to catch on in the decades following 1951 with the majority of those emigrating to India as unskilled workers seeking job opportunities. In the decades following, there was essentially no out-migration except to India; the only other major exception are Gurkha soldiers whose service for the British army began over a century before following the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1816. The Maoist civil war that lasted between 1996-2006 aggravated migration as India “provided an escape valve for forced migrants—while labour migration to the Gulf region reached unprecedented levels” (Bohra-Mishra 2011: 1527). At the same time, migration to the US and other developed regions such as the UK, Canada, and Australia became quite popular among those skilled urban Nepalis to escape from the unstable political climate in Nepal. In 2010, 982,200 skilled and unskilled Nepalis (3.3 percent of the total population) emigrated from Nepal to these top destinations and to countries with work opportunities such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Brunei Darussalam (“The Migration” 2011). Although the
civil war ended in 2006, peace has still not been fully achieved in Nepal and the government was dissolved from May 2012 through January 2014. Politically, Nepal is still recovering and rebuilding.

The story of opportunity in America that has become popular among Nepalis has led to families and individuals applying for visas, seeking out connections, and finding other ways to get themselves to “the land of opportunity.” Nepalis have mostly entered the US on student, tourist, business, or diversity visas (DV). No matter the means of arrival, there is a notable growing population of Nepali immigrants in the US. For example, “with 7,196 students, Nepal was ranked sixteenth among countries with active students in the US in June 2006” (Bohra-Mishra 2011: 1528). In addition, the likelihood of return is decreasing as the political instability in Nepal has not fully subsided, creating what is referred to as “brain drain” as skilled and educated individuals leave their developing home for a developed future. While much research on the impact of migration on developing countries including social inequality, information flows, and economic trade has been readily documented over the last 50 years provided by sources such as the UN and the Migration Policy Institute, not much serious academic attention has been given specifically to Nepal. In particular, little research has been done with Nepali youth (age 18-29) in USA. This study, therefore asks the question: What are contemporary Nepali youth in the US today saying about their exodus and commitment to Nepal? What does this tell us about migration from Nepal and the general state of the country’s development?

To answer these questions I will use an anthropological framework to analyze the various perspectives of Nepali students and their responses. It is essential that I take an ethnographic approach to compile what has been said and interpret what has been shared. My goal is to reach a social understanding of Nepali youths’ sense of self and country in between Nepal and the USA.
Through this emic approach I attempt to convey the perspectives of contemporary Nepali students in the US today and show how they think, behave, and ascribe meaning in their lives today. In order to analyze my data and interviews, I will utilize interpretive and post-structural anthropological approaches. Made popular by cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, the interpretive approach allows an anthropologist to interpret a culture by understanding how the people within that population are interpreting themselves and their own experiences. In his work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1975) Geertz says, “Nothing is more necessary to comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, and the degree to which it is interpretation, than an exact understanding of what it means- and what it does not mean- to say that our formulations of other peoples’ symbol systems must be actor-oriented” (Geertz 1975:14). To extract meaning from what is said and what is not said allows an interpretation of Nepali students’ lived experiences and meanings, adding to a greater ability to understand their perspectives.

A post-structural approach requires that I utilize a variety of selves (interviewees) to create multi-faceted perspectives that can be interpreted as anthropological knowledge and authority. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, “a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (Lyotard 1979:15). In particular to this study, we see these Nepali youth in the US as highly mobile and complex subjects that have navigated multiple spaces, created communities, and negotiated identities. Through interviewing many “selves,” this project will reflect the power of knowledge and the power of narrative, as the quintessential form of customary knowledge. Michel Foucault’s post-structural concept of governmentality is oriented as a way to look at modernity, knowledge, and power. In this context, government is defined as “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1982: 220). Foucault describes that, “Power relations have been
progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions” (Foucault 1982:793).

Foucault’s concept of governmentality can be used to explain the organized practices, mentalities, and techniques through which Nepali subjects are governed and controlled by the state, a body that he explains is just one element in a network of actors, agencies, and organizations which exercise authority over a population. Both in the US and in Nepal, Nepali youth are subject to the control of this network, including government officials, parents and other relatives, schoolteachers, friends, and peer group members. By taking their stories seriously, I can tease out how students conceive their place and perspective and how they go about negotiating those spaces.

Throughout this project, Laura Ahearn’s perspectives on language and agency and Mark Liechty’s theoretical focus on class as cultural practice are echoed in my analysis. In addition, Liechty highlights the importance of the use of interviews and an ethnographic approach in his introduction to Suitably Modern. Liechty explains that through utilizing interview transcripts, “I came to appreciate the importance of speech as a vehicle for the performance of meaning and the circulation of cultural narratives.” He identifies speech—what is said—as essential in understanding the discursive production of meaning, and I seek to utilize his approach with my own subjects as well. Ahearn’s practice theory shows how social interactions are inextricably a part of language. She asks that her practice theory of meaning constraint “demands a certain rethinking of epistemological possibilities” in which “we must shift our focus away from searching for definitive interpretations and instead concentrate on looking for information that constrains the type and number of meanings that much emerge from an event” (Ahearn 2001: 56). Ahearn’s focus on discourse is relevant in understanding such events in the form of students’
perspectives on their exodus, identity, or return.

I will use this framework to analyze young Nepali students in the US today. In so doing, I will situate emergent concerns of Nepali youth in America’s exodus and commitment to Nepal in dialogue with relevant social, historical, and political contexts. In the analysis that follows, I investi- gate how Nepali youth have negotiated transitions to the US, family ties, cultural differences, and identity formation. As emigration continues to be an increasing trend in Nepal, students discuss implications for their home country’s future and comment on their own future plans to return. Chapter Two will go over methodologies and my personal background. In Chapter Three, I explore the history of Nepal with regard to its political, economic, and social contexts and current political situation. Updates on Nepal’s development in recent decades has been documented by anthropologists Mark Liechty (2003) and Laura Ahearn (2001), whose work highlights social issues and cultural changes within Nepal. Chapter Four will address immigration and the communities that have formed in the US, specifically looking at Arjun Appadurai’s work on globalization and Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities,” Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s consideration of transnational cultures, Aihwa Ong’s concept of “flexible citizenship”, and Mark Rosenzweig’s data on remittances. Chapter Five focuses on identity formation, family ties, and nationalism, focusing particularly on a strong sense of “Nepaliness” as well as a discussion on individualism versus collectivism. Chapter Six highlights the paradox that exists for Nepali youth today as they are expected to be the future of Nepal in terms of the country’s development and stability, yet have opportunity and security if they choose to reside in the US. Lastly, in Chapter Seven I provide concluding thoughts on how this study of Nepali immigrant youth today could be further developed and how it may be applicable to illustrate a particular immigrant experience on a larger level.
B. Researcher’s Background

My personal interest of this research began over a year ago when I spent five months in Nepal on a study abroad program. Living with a Nepali family, speaking the language, and learning about development in the context of the country’s political history provided a useful background as I completed my five months, including four weeks of ethnographic research. This fieldwork experience gave me a valuable backbone from which to pursue further research with Nepali subjects back home.

In pursuing this study, I have found that my experience traveling to Nepal and conducting research there has given me a certain degree of personal rapport with Nepali immigrant students in the US. Students feel they can share more about their culture and the conditions in Nepal after knowing that I had lived in country and learned the language. Had I not had this experience, I do not think I would have been given access to such intimate areas of some of these students’ lives.
CHAPTER 2: Research Methodology
II. Research Methodology

A. Methods

My first step in completing this research began with the staple cultural anthropological method to field research: participant observation. Developed by early cultural anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, E.E. Evans Pritchard, and Margaret Mead as a means to study non-Western societies, participant observation as a way of ethnographic research allows for the principle researcher to cultivate personal relationships through both observation and participation among the group. Upon my return to the United States, I sought out Nepali connections, reaching out to my small list of contacts back in Boulder with whom I had established relationships with before studying abroad. Two University of Colorado student groups, Nepali Student Association and GlobeMed, offered various events and meetings that allowed me to explore a bit of Nepali culture in the US while cultivating relationships.

Direct observation of students coupled with collective discussions encouraged me to pursue further research and obtain approval to conduct ethnographic research with human subjects. Thus, most of the ethnographic content for this research was generated through a series of in-depth informal interviews with Nepali students, individuals whom had been identified as being born in Nepal and who currently attend university in the United States. Beyond this criterion, interviewees had to be over eighteen years of age to give informed consent to be interviewed.

Due to my personal connections to known Nepali students at the University of Colorado, I was able to tap into the existing relationships that I had established to begin my interviews, meeting students at the library, in coffee shops, and other campus buildings. From there, I was able to utilize the strategy of snowball sampling, reaching out to students that had personal
connections to those that I had already interviewed to expand my reach both locally and nationally. From this method of outreach, I was able to come across a relatively diverse group of students in terms of age of arrival, family history, and personal goals. A second strategy for outreach included emailing Nepali Student Associations at universities across the country and setting up interviews through Skype or phone conversations which gave me access to students studying in places not only in Colorado but also around the US such as Maine, New Hampshire, and North Carolina. All of the people I met with were willing to offer up their time, eager to share stories, and excited at the opportunity to share with someone who had been to their country and could theoretically empathize with their experiences. In the end, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with 8 males and 9 females residing in 4 different states. Note that pseudonyms have been used for each student to protect respondent confidentiality, as is consistent with ethnographic research at this time.

I went into each interview setting with a general set of questions related to life in Nepal, immigration stories, life in the US, and how one conceives their own identity and places his or herself in the world. Semi-structured in format, these interviews were informal and conversational as my aim in these interviews was not to simply check through a questionnaire, but rather to listen to these students and understand the particular experiences they relayed to me. For this reason, I amended my prepared questions slightly as I learned what issues were more important to the students I met. It must be noted that the small sample size and geographical reach can limit the generalization that these findings reflect all contemporary Nepali student immigrant’s concerns.

B. Goals of the Study

This project attempts to update some of the aforementioned scholars’ concepts and
conclusions with current opinions and concerns with perspectives from Nepali youth. These concerns are revealed through students’ immigration stories, conceptualization of Nepal’s relative development and political stability, predictions regarding their mother country’s future, and how being an immigrant has influenced their own identity and desire (or lack of desire) to return to Nepal. The project places these individuals as subjects within the global discussion, giving voice to their agency as valuable actors in a challenging situation. If Nepali people identify youth as the key to Nepal’s future, then it is essential to understand the perspectives of these individuals and to take in what hopes and dreams they have for Nepal and for themselves. From this commentary, one can see the varying ways in which Nepali immigrant students envision their future ties to Nepal, whether it be through staying in the US and continuing their education, returning to live and work in Nepal, or an alternate future entirely. Through collecting various life stories of Nepali students in the US, one can recognize that there is a diversity of lived experiences and opinions among these students, revealing that one’s outlook on life, personal identity, and future plans cannot be determined by any single variable.
CHAPTER 3: History & Context
III. History & Context

A. Nepal’s politics

Nepal’s political history is one dominated by the Rana dynasty whose prime ministers maintained a tight and controlling dictatorship for over 100 years. Under the Ranas, Nepal had little engagement in modern science or technology that set the country up for a long legacy of underdevelopment. It was not until a revolt in 1950 that overthrew the Rana oligarchy, that the country realized it needed to “incorporate its varied ethnic populations into a single nation” in order to begin to address the myriad needs of its citizens. The decade-long Maoist civil war that lasted from 1996-2006 between the Nepali government and Maoist fighters to overthrow the Nepali monarchy fueled an already unstable system. During this time, “the Maoist forces brutalized Nepal through armed attacks, executions, planting landmines, bombings, harassment, road blockages, and other sorts of public and violent demonstrations” (McGranahan 2014: 6). Attacking 74 out of 75 districts in Nepal, Maoists terrorized Nepali citizens through burning buildings, seizing land, kidnapping, torturing, and killing over 16,000 people with innumerable missing to this day. As I interviewed Nepali student Aadi, a sophomore who moved to the US at the age of ten, she recalled a visit she made to her family’s village in 2009. “My dad told me how in his village the Maoists would come and ask for rice and money. They would take all the women’s jewelry. Then when we returned, there was shooting down the road. It was some sort of fight, I don’t know what they wanted, but it definitely wasn’t safe,” (A. Joshi 2014). In her visit back to Nepal, Aadi experienced the violence that continues to terrorize Nepalis, particularly in the villages.

In an article published in Himal Magazine shortly after the civil war came to an end, Liz Philipson of the London School of Economics explained that this constant threat of attack has
left Nepal’s citizens, and its villages in particular, never quite living at ease as “issues of structured social alienation, economic inequality and regional disparity, have contributed to the success of the Maoist revolution in rural Nepal” (Philipson 2006). Even in the city, the paramilitary branch of the Maoist party, the Young Communist League remains at large. This lack of political structure without parliament, constitution, budget, or governance prompted a period of “almost constant bandh (nationwide protest and strikes) during which transportation, business, and education were severely disrupted” (McGranahan 2014:4).

Nepalis have learned that bandhs are an expected and typical part of daily life. Liechty describes how in modern Nepal, “Middle-class youth are almost by definition educated and un- or underemployed. Many thousands of youth people, upon finishing high school classes around age sixteen, spend year after year in a kind of limbo: taking and retaking college exams, waiting for test results, working on ‘back papers’ and sitting out vacations and student strikes,” (Liechty 2003: 211). While they once chose to stay home from work or school for reasons related to safety, today the typical bandh almost acts as a symbol for what strike should be rather than a strike that the state or institutions take seriously. Bandhs are an example of how although government allows for the freedom of its actors, it is not necessarily constitutive of that freedom, and therefore individuals organizing a strike are constrained as actors in a system. While bandhs may have begun as attempts at counter-conduct which “seeks not to challenge or overthrow but to influence the society of which they are a part,” the response of such conduct from the government and the people of Nepal rarely achieves the desired results (Foucault 2007: 196). As Nepalis in the US recalled memories of bandhs, none of the students necessarily expressed interest in or understanding of bandhs, viewing them more as obstacles and annoyances than impactful strikes. Nonetheless, the presence of bandhs today reflects the continuous political
instability in Nepal.

Based on Carole McGranahan’s “Nepal Country Report,” stability and peace relations have yet to be attained in the eight years following the war’s end. An expert on political conditions in Nepal, McGranahan, notes that although 2006 may mark the end of the war, “Maoists have never abandoned the use of violence or the threat of return to war regardless of whether they were operating inside or outside of the government” (McGranahan 2014:6). Maoists are responsible for halting the rewriting of the constitution in May 2010 as well as orchestrating a successful forced resignation of the Prime Minister of Nepal, thus constantly contributing to the dissolution of the Nepali government (McGranahan 2014:8).

Essentially, the violence is not over. McGranahan writes, “Although the civil war might officially be over, the current situation is one of unresolved issues, an uncompleted, unsecured peace, no fully-functioning Supreme Court, no legal Constitution, and a government only just beginning to reconstitute itself (McGranahan 2014:8). Fear of attack coupled with sporadic bandhs, shifting political leaders, and periods of both peace and turmoil creates an atmosphere of an unpredictable present and future. It seems for Nepalis, the only thing that they can count on is that they cannot count on things to stay stagnant for long. The period following the war has “seen great confusion, and hope mixed with fear and resignation” (McGranahan 2014:6). It is from this context that we can begin to understand the general trends that have lead Nepalis out of the country.

B. Nepal’s economics

“I don’t know how Nepalis have money these days, they don’t work.” Sunita’s words were quick yet blunt. She echoed, “Sorry, but I’ve seen how so many people just stay at home and I just don’t get how they do it. Not after coming here and knowing how hard we have to

22
work,” (Hamal 2014). As I interviewed Sunita, she told me about her family’s life in Bhaktapur, one of the three ancient Newar kingdoms in Kathmandu, and how her father was the only child of seven to receive a complete education. “I don’t remember much about Nepal, but when we lived there, we lived with the whole family. We all lived under one roof, with my dad’s siblings and their spouses and kids. None of them worked though. My dad was the only one that would leave” (Hamal 2014). Sunita’s faint memories of her early years in Nepal, while fuzzy to her, reflect the reality of unemployment in Nepal where the economy is simply not capable of creating productive employment for all those entering the labor market. Nepal’s unemployment rate was estimated to be at forty-seven percent in 2008 (United Nations Nepal 2014). The United Nations Nepal Information Platform identifies some of the reasoning behind unemployment throughout the country as, “Enormous inequalities exist among workers across sectors, geographic locations and gender. Employment opportunities are mainly centered in urban areas, where only a fifth of Nepal’s youth live,” (United Nations Nepal 2014).

In the last fifty years, globalization has contributed to significant growth of international trade, capital movements, and migration, altering the international scene. This influence has also been seen in Nepal as in 2000, the per capita gross national income (GNI) of a Nepali was $259 and has since doubled to $568 in 2010 (Chalise 2010). The 2013 Human Development Report, The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World, notes that “over the last decade, all countries [in the study] accelerated their achievements in the education, health, and income dimensions as measured in the Human Development Index (HDI)” (United Nations Development Programme 2013: iv). While these particular factors have expanded and GNI of Nepal has doubled in a decade, it must be noted that compared to other countries, Nepal still remains at the bottom of the ‘very low income group.’ According to the World Bank, a country
with $10,000 to $1,999 GNI per capita is categorized under high-income group followed by a middle-income group with $5,000 to $9,999 GNI per capita. A country with GNI per capita at $2,500 to 4,999 falls under the low-income group, whereas a country less than $2,500 falls under the very low income group. This categorization will remain so long as Nepal’s education system remains static, its private sector suffers from an “unfavourable investment climate, poor regulation, lack of incentives, growing labour militancy, weak rule of law and, most prominently, a poor political environment and a long transition period to peace leading to uncertainty” (ibid).

Knowing how common unemployment continues to be in Nepal, students expressed how “lucky” they were that their parents had been able to work to get their family to the US. In Ashmi’s case, she explained, “My mom’s side was pretty well off. My grandfather did international work and brought new agriculture to Nepal. My mom’s educational experience was unique. She was able to study in Bhutan, went to boarding school in the Philippines and I think then she got the opportunity to apply for a student visa. My dad’s family was poor, but well educated. So I think that gave me a really great opportunity” (Mool 2014). Ashmi attributes her mother’s family’s success along with her father’s relative success in education as a major part of the reason why she and her sister were in the US in the first place. Her awareness of the relative economic status and success of Nepalis shows there is a major discrepancy between those that have received formal education or held a job in a more profitable industry such as at a university or at a well-funded NGO and those that only attained basic education or may be unemployed. Given the context of shortages in the domestic labor market, we can begin to understand how foreign migration is on trend as one of the main employment opportunities for Nepali people today.
i. “I’m sending money home”

Since the 1990s, international remittances have increased dramatically in developing countries, fueling unsustainable relationships between high-developed countries (HDC) and low-developed countries (LDC). According to the World Bank, remittances “increased from US$30 billion in 1990 to US$325 billion in 2010, and have emerged as a most important source of private capital flows for dozens of these [LDC] countries” (World Bank 2011). Parajuli and others (i.e. Lowell and Findlay 2001; Wagle 2009; Rosenzweig 2005; Acharya 2012) problematize the effects of migration through examining foreign remittances and other socio-economic implications for developing countries such as Nepal.

According to the International Organization for Migration, the 2013 estimation for the remittances sent to Nepal through outside sources amounts to over US$5,363 million. Comparatively, the 2010 per capita income of a Nepali was US$472. Although agriculture remains a major source of livelihood, Nepal’s labor export has grown in the last decade. As a result, “remittance is the largest foreign exchange earner and it exceeds the sum of tourism, foreign aid and exports earnings in recent years” (Seddon 2005). In a strict economic sense, remittance is beneficial to the recipient society with added revenues and benefits to the government, economy, community, and families while reducing poverty. However, Wagle (2009) and Acharya’s (2012) studies conclude that while remittances can improve economic inequality among certain regional areas (mostly rural), it can also lead to increased economic inequality for those families unable to receive remittances, leaving them bereft of such benefits. The only remittances that have been found to decrease inequality within Nepal are those funds that are sent from India- this distinction is “due to the larger participation of the poor in the Nepal-India migration process” (Acharya 2012:3).
There is such a heavy reliance on this outside income source in Nepal that, according to the Nepal Millennium Development Goal Report 2013, “If the individuals that are currently receiving remittance had the payments cut, their poverty level would be at 35.3 percent, compared to 19.3 percent currently.” This would have a significant effect on the 55.8 percent of households that currently receive remittances averaging NRs 80,436 (around US$800) each year. Interestingly, the Living Standard Survey 2010-11 reveals that of these remittances, over 78 percent is being used in daily consumption as opposed to loan repayments and capital formation (“The semi-colonial feeling” 2012).

Family size and remittance have been found to be positively correlated as larger families are likely to receive greater amounts of foreign remittance. This could be due to the ability of larger families to invest in better foreign employment opportunities ensuring greater return as well as whether families may tend to have multiple migrant members contributing to a family at once. Arjun, a senior undergraduate student who came to the US in 2006, explained his future plans to support his parents through sending remittances home. “My family got closer once we moved to the states. We agreed with our parents that the kids [he and his siblings] would send money each month. We want to support them so they can move back, because we know they’re miserable here,” (Rana 2014).

Prashant, a graduate student who lived in Kathmandu for the first twenty-four years of his life and intends to return upon completion of his degree, shared that he sends remittances home to support his family. For these Nepali students in the US, sending remittances may be a way for them to continue to support their families in their absence while studying abroad. Another likelihood, possibly more for Arjun and his siblings who have no intention of returning, is that these remittances are part of a sense of responsibility they fill with money as they know that is
the only way they can continue to support their parents from halfway around the world. For Arjun’s parents, the remittances would be going toward supporting his parents’ retirement, as their age and a lack of work opportunities do not make it likely for them to return and receive an income in Nepal. Nepali youth of today are cognizant of the poor economic state of Nepal. Their remittances or future plans to send money home reflect both a lack of desire to return and an understanding of Nepal’s relatively slow state of development.

Beyond its role of funneling cash into local families, who in turn, invest those foreign monies in Nepal’s consumer economies, the remittance economy has an impact in accounting for large amounts of cash circulating through Kathmandu. As “several hundred million USD funnel into Kathmandu each year, one begins to realize how certain people in certain places may be cash-rich even in a ‘least developed country’ whose GNP per capita was only 190 USD in 1993” (Liechty 2003:51). Since cash has become relatively abundant yet investment opportunities are limited, this has led to a stratification of class as many more people experience benefits of a trickle-down effect. It is reasonable to guess that many of the families of students that I interviewed were benefactors of such a dynamic as the majority of parents were university professors, NGO workers, or government officials back when they lived in Nepal. Understanding the effect of remittances and unemployment on the economy in Nepal provides a context from which to understand other reasons for migration and also informs our understanding of class dynamics.

ii. Class and Caste

In his 2003 work Suitably Modern, anthropologist Mark Liechty traces the growth of a new middle class in Kathmandu. He highlights modern class culture as a major influence to building modern identities and sense of class among Nepalis in the urban center. Liechty
identifies the political promise of democracy in 1951 and the Nepali state’s “open door” policy as some of the integral moments that set in motion “the opening of a social space for a middle class between commoners and the elite” (Liechty 2003: 47). In Kathmandu:

The middle class are those people struggling to rescue a socially valid ‘traditional’ Nepali morality from its associations with the provincial vulgarity of the urban poor, while at the same time attempting to define a ‘suitably’ modern-but-still-Nepali lifestyle of moral and material restraint distinct from what they view as corrupt elite lifestyles of foreignness and consumer excess. (Liechty 2003: 61)

The essence of middle-classness is then about teetering between two worlds of modernity and tradition, balanced between the poor and elite.

While interviewing Nepali students, I could not help but think that even though students’ had diverse backgrounds—some came from villages others from the city, some had parents working as professors at distinguished universities and others had moms that stayed home and took care of the family—there are a certain amount of resources one must possess in order to come to the US. Even if one does not have the money upfront, to take out a loan requires the means to borrow money (via owning land, a store, or other form of capital like livestock). I therefore wanted to see where my interviewees placed themselves among other Nepalis. To understand if my interviewees identified with this middle class identity, I focused on the ways they spoke about their lives and thought of themselves to indicate class barriers rather than analyzing hard numbers such as income or family size. In doing so, I found that almost every student—no matter their age of arrival, their birthplace, or if they came with their family or as an individual—identified their family as “middle class.”

Claiming the social middle, it was challenging for students to place themselves anywhere other than the middle economically. They made a point to distinguish that they were certainly not low class (typically associated with the poor and uneducated), but did not feel they were high
class and economically privileged. The desire of Nepali students to place themselves in the middle allows for tangible benefits of association with the middle class, a social representation that Stacy Pigg has similarly documented among villagers in Nepal. As the discourse of bikas (development) is prominent in Nepal, the discourse of the middle classness is distinct as well. Nepali students in America place themselves among the social middle much like Pigg found, “local people portray themselves as bikasi [and] contest constructions of themselves as villagers” (Pigg 1992: 511). Students did feel privileged, however, in their opportunity to study in the US. Each student was very aware that many other Nepalis will never get the chance to experience running water, constant electricity, or proper health care. Anita, who came to the US at the age of four with her family, saw some of the class differences between America and Nepal explaining, “Anyone can come to America and have opportunity. In Nepal, you need money,” (A. Bisht 2014).

In the end, I found that pinpointing exactly where in this social middle students placed their families did not matter as, “What constitutes this sense of middle-classness is not necessarily a common lifestyle or a uniform set of values but rather a shared project of locating oneself in a new and legitimate space between two devalued social poles” (Liechty 2003:67). Madhav, who grew up in rural southwest Nepal explained, “For an average Nepali family, to be in a developed country like the US is challenging financially. My family took a loan that was four lakh (around USD$4,000) for me to come here [US]. I’m not from those big areas and my family is not financially strong,” (Dhakal 2014). When I asked him to compare his family to others, he said, “I guess we are average,” (ibid). As he said this, I could not help but wonder if the average Nepali family is able to send their child to the US for school, and if not, how wide this “average” middle class is in Nepal. As class relates to students’ perspectives about their
exodus from Nepal, from my interviews I can conclude that while some students tend to believe that a combination of their family’s relative wealth, education, and luck got them to the US, it is mostly parents’ hard work and sacrifice that students believed had gotten them a visa. Even for those students who traveled to the US for study abroad who attributed some of their own hard work in school to their acceptance at their university, they recognize the financial strain and sacrifice their families made for their children.

Arjun, who came to the US in 2006 with his twin brother, mother, father, and sister from a small village near Pokhara, was not shy when he revealed, “They [his parents] don’t want to admit it, but they were pretty rich, they were set. My parents had their own business in the village; it was kind of like a hardware shop” (Rana 2014). Arjun attributed his father’s success to his education, explaining, “My dad had a lot of connections because he studied in a good school—you know, Budhanilkantha—it’s a private English school in Kathmandu. From there he made a lot of friends and kept connections, worked hard, and was able to own his own business,” (ibid). In order to come to the US, however, Arjun’s parents had to sell everything they owned, sacrificing his father’s business and their home in his village, Sandhikarka.

I learned that for most students studying in America, financial wealth is relative, and although they may know their families are better off than many other Nepali families, in the US, things are not much easier. Prashant paid for his visa and plane ticket to leave Kathmandu, but admitted, “If I didn’t get a scholarship, I wouldn’t have come” (P. Joshi 2014). While Prashant had the finances to leave, the cost of living in the US does not allow him to stay easily, which is why for many students their first priority in choosing a school is seeing which one will grant them the “full ride” they need. For Madhav, Rajesh, Amita, and Surya, who each came to the US without their families in pursuit of education at an American university, a “full ride” scholarship
was the number one criteria for them when choosing a college. While location and reputation were certainly factors in Madhav’s decision, he said ultimately, “I chose NCSU (North Carolina State University) because I got a response that a professor would support me. I got a research assistantship, a stipend, and financial aid, so that’s where I went,” (ibid). In addition to the students that came to the US on their own for education, I found that even those who came with their families needed some sort of financial aid to attend university. As I considered this conversation on class, wealth, and status, I realized that educational and economic opportunities in the US are relative and that getting to America is one feat in itself. Being successful and in the middle class in the US is more challenging and families often struggle to make ends meet.

The opportunity to work or study in the US is accessible to a limited population of Nepalis who must be knowledgeable about the different visas they can attain, have the criteria and education to apply, and lastly have the finances to get themselves out of the country. Recognizing this economic limitation, the majority of those students who I interviewed were from a relative class status in which they had the capital and connections to migrate.

It is important to touch upon caste as it relates to social and economic history in Nepal and understand the ways in which it relates to class. Caste is a highly institutionalized form of social inequality and stratification; likewise, class is another manifestation of social inequality with its own practices and institutions. While caste identity remains a part of everyday life in Nepal, Liechty notes that caste and class do not always correlate. “Stories of low-caste taxi drivers with monthly incomes five times that of high-caste government officers abound as people in Kathmandu struggle to reconcile two often conflicting modes of social stratification,” (Liechty 2003:63). Although caste rank is still a good predictor of class rank and lifestyle, today, “squalid squatter settlements include Brahman families of the highest ritual ranks, while members of once
despised and marginalized ethnic groups preside over vast transnational business empires” (Liechty 2003:64). Essentially, is not possible to assume one’s class or caste are related anymore with globalization and the modern emergence of a dominant middle class. For some of the students I interviewed, they felt that their caste played a factor in their ability to emigrate from Nepal. Menaka opined, “I think that being Chhetri definitely opened doors. My family was able to move out and come here [US] because of that. It would have been easy for my dad to stay [in Nepal], but he didn’t and was able to leave,” (M. Bisht 2014). Menaka understood her family’s caste to be a factor in their ability to immigrate, thus granting her more opportunity than someone possibly from a lower caste. Although studies have shown that diversity in ethnic group and caste is increasing among Nepali immigrants, all of the interviewees I met with identified himself or herself as Brahmin or Chhetri, castes that are typically considered high caste in Nepal, or as Newar, an ethnic group indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley. These results are fairly consistent with Liechty’s observation that class and caste are often correlated.

C. Nepal’s social context

i. A Patriarchal System

The rigidly patriarchal system that dominates Nepal is demonstrated through women’s general subordinance to men in virtually every aspect of daily life. While there are exceptions to this among particular ethnic groups, however, much of what is seen is women fulfilling traditional roles such as fetching water, doing farm work, and cooking meals. According to the Global Gender Gap Report published in 2013 by the World Economic Forum, out of the 136 countries analyzed for women’s economic participation and opportunity, education and attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, Nepal ranked low for each category, bringing it to 121st overall (World Economic Forum 2013:29). Although Nepal’s ranking
displays its severe gender gap disparity, the report also notes significant growth and change through tracking its gender gap over time. With a 10.4% increase in score from 2006 (the end of the civil war) to 2013, the gender gap narrowed slightly relative to other countries, revealing that some social, political, and economic change has developed for women in Nepal.

The change, however, is relatively slow and for some women, is not enough to satisfy their future needs and desire for individual freedoms and rights. Ashmi moved to the US from Nepal at the age of five with her mother, sister, and father, “Because my parents thought that Nepal was a bad place to raise kids, especially two daughters. Maybe if my parents had had boys, we never would have come here,” (Mool 2014). Very involved in women’s rights back in Nepal, Ashmi’s mother worked for a women’s agency fighting for equal opportunity. Ashmi credits her mother’s exposure to life outside of Nepal and her high level of formal education to exposing her own daughters to life outside the heavily patriarchal system of Nepal. Ashmi’s experience highlights one perspective from an immigrant who came to the US at a young age and knows only of patriarchy in Nepal through her mother and father’s eyes and from stories she has heard from others still residing in Nepal.

As a Nepali who has spent two separate periods of her life in Nepal, Deepa had to readjust to cultural norms when she and her little brother moved back to Kathmandu to attend boarding school. “Gender was a huge issue,” Deepa commented as I asked her about returning to live in Nepal and the cultural adjustments she went through, “My grandma wanted me to pray with her while my brother slept,” (Mahat 2014). Confused about the cultural differences in expectation between men and women, Deepa had to learn to adapt to the patriarchal system in Nepal, yet ensured me that she loves “American ideals like freedom of expression. I think you should be whoever you are,” (ibid). For Deepa, she is able to piece together both Nepali and
American cultures for her benefit.

Amita, who came to the US alone on a student visa at the age of nineteen, was up front with me as she observed, “Nepal is very patriarchal. Boys can go out and do things. Girls are supposed to help out... When I visited home, I realized that because I’m twenty-one years old that my family wanted me to get married... In our culture you don’t talk about boys. I wasn’t raised that way, but once I came here, I realized how different it can be,” (Karnali 2014).

Amita’s realization marks a cultural difference between the US and Nepal that distinguishes the role of women and men in society. Often, women are expected to marry around twenty-one while men can go to college, work, and establish themselves and get married around twenty-seven. Each student I met with was very familiar with this matrimonial system from their own parents’ arrangements.

ii. Education

Education in Nepal is distinctly divided into private or public schooling. Once kept in the hands of the elite, “formal education has rapidly expanded in Nepal since the 1951 overthrow of the Rana regime” when education was only available to the few at the top of society (Skinner 1990: 8). Under Rana rule:

Less than two percent of the population was literate. Telephones, electricity, and postal services served only one percent of the population. Government expenditures were focused solely on salaries and benefits for the army, the police, and civil servants. Health and education received less than one percent of the government's expenditures. (Miller 2007)

According to The World Factbook, since common Nepali people were granted access to education, over 1 million students were enrolled in primary schools by 1990 and over 6 million were enrolled in primary, secondary, and post secondary education in 2010 (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). In addition, literacy has improved significantly over the years from about 5
percent in 1952 to 60 percent in 2010 (ibid). However, today “access, repetition, drop-out and
drug use are the remarkable issues in rural areas as significant segments of the child population
(1.4 million) are not attending school,” (Bharati 2007:44). Bharati and Takao’s 2007 study
determined that rather than the stereotyped perception that formal schooling has a lack of visible
benefits for children of rural agriculturalists, “education [is] a gate way for better life and
everyday living “ (Bharati 2007: 45). Recognizing education as a ‘gateway for a better life,’
Nepalis are seeking higher education and reaching for that ideal in the US and abroad. Of the
seventeen interviewees, seven students lived in rural areas outside of Kathmandu Valley before
coming to the US and identified their education as the driving force for leaving the village.
Interestingly, education in the village drove students and their families to want more and to seek
even greater educational opportunity in the US.

Mark R. Rosenzweig identified various long-run effects of migration for developing
countries, in particular discussing whether educational investments abroad affected
sophistication of skills or schooling for the home country. He found that much of this data was
challenging to track, “due to data limitations, and also due to the fact that in many low-income
countries returns to skills or schooling have not changed,” (Rosenzweig 2005:6). For Nepal in
particular, a “setting in which out-migration is induced in part by poor quality schools, the
responsiveness of skill investments to increased out-migration among residents is small” (ibid).
Universities in Nepal have grown in number over the years from one in 1959 (Tribhuvan
University) to five more in the 1990s (Kathmandu University, Pokhara University, Purbanchal
University, Nepal Sanskrit University, Lumbini Bouddha University) and two institutions in
2010 (Far-western University Kanchanpur and Nepal Agriculture and Forestry University),
showing an increased investment in the education of its people, yet there is still concern for the
quality of this education (Embassy of Nepal 2014). According to each interviewee, they or their parents sought out education in America specifically for its quality, the prestige, and the opportunities that come from it. Their desire to receive a degree from a reputable university reveals a lack of trust in the education system in Nepal as well as an ideological desire to escape ‘tradition’ and seek ‘modernity’ (Pigg 1992: 498). Development discourse is relevant in understanding how students and their families are not recognizing a detectable change in Nepal’s education system and are therefore finding ways to be in a developed land.

Undergraduate student, Roshni, recalls that her family’s move to America a decade ago came about so that her father, a professor at a university in Nepal, could have a “chance to work on his masters in the US” (Lohani 2014). Roshni explained that while her father had already received his masters in biology in Kathmandu, he wanted that degree from the US. She said, “The whole family moved too. He [Roshni’s father] planned to get his degree and then return [to Nepal], but we ended up staying. For me and my sister to get our education here was important” (ibid). Similarly, both Madhav, a twenty-seven year old Nepali student pursuing a masters in agriculture, and Prashant, a twenty-five year old Nepali student pursuing engineering, came to the US after having already received masters degrees in Nepal. Madhav explained, “The academic future that I required to be a competitive person not only in my country, but in all of South Asia is only possible here [US]. There are so many research restrictions there [Nepal]” (Dhakal 2014). Roshni’s father, Madhav, and Prashant’s moves to the US reflect how much weight the masters degrees of Nepali universities have in the fields that many students are encouraged to pursue. It poses a challenge when Nepali families encourage their children to become doctors or engineers yet, to use Madhav’s words, “to be a competitive person,” requires these youth to seek higher education in the West (ibid). As a result, education in the US
continues to be a driving force behind study abroad.

iii. The “Brain Drain”

Existing literature defines “brain drain” as “the international transfer of resources in the form of human capital and mainly applies to the migration of relatively highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries” (Beine 2008: 631). Early contributors to “brain drain” (Grubel and Scott 1996; Bhagwati and Hamada 1974; McCulloch and Yellen 1977) concluded that “the welfare of those left behind would still fall given that the social return to education exceeds its private return” and found migration to be problematic. However, in their 2008 study on *Brain Drain and Human Capital Formation in Developing Countries: Winners and Losers* Beine et al. explored the possibility that “brain drain” contributed to human capital formation in countries with a high emigrant population, Beine et al. found that Nepal was one of the countries experiencing a beneficial brain drain, with a 0.1 percent increase in proportion of skilled workers, skilled labor, and general labor force. The study concludes that brain drain “fosters investment in education at home,” and suggests that migration may not always be detrimental for sending countries that are trying to develop (Beine 2008: 648). While Beine’s study concludes “brain drain” may have positive effects, the concerns of Nepalis and others shows statistics may not always reflect the discourse.

In her 2007 article, “Negotiating Peace,” Liz Philipson highlights the role that migration plays in structuring peace relations and mapping out the future of Nepal. Philipson warns that Nepal’s people must deal with new problems associated with displacement as:

Economically active people have left the country; seasonal workers have not returned from India; and there are sharp increases in female-headed households and bereaved dependents. People are moving to the urban areas, either to the district headquarters or, when they can, to Kathmandu. Those with more money and opportunity are leaving the country altogether. The loss of social capital from war-torn areas is always much harder to replace than the infrastructure. (Philipson 2007)
The loss of skilled workers and educated individuals has an immense effect on the structure of the country as it tries to repair itself after the Maoist civil war. As those with more money find ways of leaving Nepal altogether, it shifts the makeup of the rural and city areas, making it harder for stable progress to be made. Although for many Nepalis, migration was a political move in origin for safety, the brain drain following the Maoist civil war has had a great effect on negotiating peace as well.

In an article in *The Himalayan Times* newspaper titled “Who pays the price for Nepal’s brain drain?” Shilu Manandhar explains that political and economic instability are the main reasons for the brain drain. Manandhar complains that “Nepal is losing its young people and the government has done absolutely nothing about it. There has been no investment in the youth” (Manandhar 2010). His solution to the loss of Nepal’s youth is governmental, in that “it is only a stable and accountable government that will end the stagnation of economic growth and empowerment in Nepal” (ibid).

What I find particularly interesting are the shared perspectives individuals have left in the comments section of the article’s webpage. R Lamichhane of Pokhara, Nepal comments, “In my point of view, brain drain is not entirely bad, provided it can be converted into brain sharing and brain circulation. However, I strongly believe all of this roots back to the educational system of our country that is badly in need of dynamic change” (Lamichhane 2010). Lamichhane’s perspective highlights that migration of youth from Nepal can be beneficial, as Beine et al.’s study concluded, yet his latter comment suggests that if education in Nepal was improved “brain drain” may be less of a problem. Prajwal Khanal of Kalanki, Nepal shared, “I think the brain drain is a good thing rather than frustrated geniuses looking for a solution to the current predicament. It’s better that they are there than here frustrated like ticking time-bombs. Thank
God there is Europe and America” (Khanal 2010). Khanal’s own frustration is evident in his comment and it helps to highlight some of the opinions of Nepalis in country, showing some of the hopelessness that Nepali students in the US shared they and their parents experienced while in Nepal. Sarthak Byanjankar of Lalitpur, Nepal was not in alignment with Khanal’s sentiments as he questioned, “what about the country that has breed-ed him [sic] nurtured him and more than anything given him an identity. So why don’t we have our individual duties to fulfill in return? Shouldn’t we aid the nation so that the dream shared by all Nepalese is achieved?” (Byanjankar 2010). As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Byanjankar’s belief that Nepali migrants should return to contribute to ‘the dream shared by all Nepalese’ is interestingly consistent with many of the students with whom I met.

D. “Youth are the Key”

“Young people today are caught in a difficult situation: they are educated enough to see their dreams and know there is outside opportunity that exists, yet, they want to help their communities change. They [youth] realize it’s not easy to create change as they see the challenges ahead, and often find that it is much easier to not tackle them” (Parajuli 2013). At an October 2013 presentation at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Anil Parajuli, Himalayan Healthcare’s Director of Nepal Operations shared these thoughts on what he saw as some of the essential shortcomings of Nepal. He emphasized the country’s lack of healthcare, food security, and education as critical problems that need to be addressed. Recognized as an Ashoka Fellow in 2001 for his work with Himalayan Healthcare and as one of the top fifty personalities in Nepal from 2004-2007 by The Boss magazine, Parajuli is one of many leading social entrepreneurs who has been lauded for his innovative solutions to social problems with the potential to change patterns across society (Ashoka 2014). In regard to the youth of Nepal, Parajuli raised the critical
question, “How can you help others when you need to help yourself?” His question lays out the challenge the young Nepali students that I interviewed felt they must deal with today. These students can identify the problems Nepal’s people face and may even have some solutions. However, for most students it is hard to be fully confident to conceive of either returning to Nepal to an uncertain future or to remain in the US and find a way to make an impact from halfway around the world.

According to the 2011 Nepal Population Report published by the Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal is a relatively young country. Demographically speaking, “the population is composed primarily of young people and since the 1960s it has remained young” as more than 39% of its present population is under 15 years of age and more than half of the population is in the age group 15-49 (Nepal Population Report 2011: 16). The United Nations highlights, “This relatively large percentage of young people (‘demographic dividend’) is seen as a great opportunity for the nation to take a leap forward in development” (United Nations Development Programme 2013). Although youth comprise the majority of the national population and more than three-quarters of the independent workforce, those that remain in country feel that they are left with a problem to fix yet lack the resources, skills, and knowledge to pursue it properly. This dynamic is what researchers in support of the negative effects of “brain drain” on developing countries point to as the youth that have the drive, the education, and the means to create change for Nepal are the ones leaving its borders.

As I spoke with Prashant, a twenty-five year old graduate student who moved to Boulder to pursue a master’s degree in engineering, he revealed his deep interest and intention to return to Nepal upon completion of his education in order to help his country develop. Prashant commented, “Although I want to return, I plan to work in the industry here [US] for a few years
and see how sophisticated things [technology] get and then go back and take what I learn with me,” (P. Joshi 2014). While Prashant seemed convinced of his future plans to return to Nepal, he also had no sense of urgency as he told me “I’m in a five-year program, but I can always extend it,” (ibid). Prashant’s hesitation to return is not unusual and is consistent among the perspectives of most interviewees I met with. Even Santosh, who came to the US with his family ten years ago shared the pressure that young Nepalis face today to return to Nepal. He revealed, “Yeah, people that could make a difference are all gone; they live other places, and a lot of them come here,” (Malla 2014). There is a discourse of return that is common among Nepalis. Youth are told they are the key to Nepal’s future, as Parajuli’s words suggest. While a discourse around Nepali youth returning to help develop their country of birth is evident, there is a conflict between what is said about Nepal, what people believe to be true about Nepal, and what people actually choose to do. Youth may be the key, yet many of the students highlight the challenges and constraints that they face as individuals and as Nepali youth in America today.
CHAPTER 4: Coming to America
IV. Coming to America

A. Immigration

1974 marks the first year that Nepalese immigrants constituted a ‘countable’ population when fifty-six Nepalese immigrants arrived in the United States (Miller 2007). These earlier immigrants were mostly professionals, coming to the US as professionals, engineers, doctors, and programmers trying their luck in “the land of opportunity.” The number of Nepali immigrants remained below one hundred each year until 1990, when, according to the US Census Bureau 2,615 Americans were reported with Nepalese ancestry. Since then, the US Diversity Visa (1995-present) and Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006) have swelled the rate of Nepali immigrants entering the US. Continual flows of immigrants are making their way to America, an increasing amount of which arrive as students with their families, seeking education (Bohra-Mishra 2011:1528).

In 2004, “the United States granted 620, 210 student visas” and in 2012, more than 670,000 international students were enrolled in American universities, 11,500 of which came directly from Nepal (Institute of International Education 2013). The Institute of International Education’s Open Doors 2013 report shows that “in the 2012/13 academic year, 8,920 students from Nepal were studying in the United States,” ranking Nepal as the fourteenth leading place of origin for students coming to the United States,” ranking Nepal as the fourteenth leading place of origin for students coming to the United States for education. In the report, record numbers (over 10,000) of Nepali students immigrated and attended American universities in 2008, 2009, and 2010, correlating to the years following the Maoist civil war. Many students that I met with who came to the US at a young age noticed these trends as well.

Arriving with his family in 2004, Santosh recalls, “ten years ago there weren’t as many Nepali people as there are today,” (Malla 2014). Menaka also remembers, “The Nepali
community in Boulder was so much smaller before so you knew all the families. But now it’s so much bigger. There’s a new younger generation arriving with their little kids and then there’s individuals too that are Nepali but they tend to be younger and in college,” (M. Bisht 2014). Consistent with Menaka’s observation, Bohra-Mishra’s study also reflected this new young generation with over 75 percent under the age of thirty and the respondents having spent an average of 8.4 years in the US (Bohra-Mishra 2011:1529).

As the immigrant population from Nepal increases each year, it becomes important to understand what factors are encouraging Nepalis to leave their country and come to the US. In Pratikshya Bohra-Mishra’s 2011 study on Nepali immigrants in the US, of the sixty-one individuals interviewed, her results showed that an overwhelming amount had immigrated for educational opportunity (92 percent of respondents). Other reasons included lack of economic opportunity in Nepal, migration of others, family reunion, culture of migration, and political/economic instability in Nepal. Through uncovering personal reasons for migration, Bohra-Mishra found that, “Nepalis seem to develop an ideological and cultural link with the Western world as a result of globalisation and the high level of human capital acquired from the importation and replication of Western culture and methods for education,” (Bohra-Mishra 2011: 1530). Consistent with Bohra-Mishra’s findings, I found that reasons for migration to the US were not only about taking advantage of educational opportunity, but were also about being influenced by a culture of migration. The ideologies linking the Western world with Nepal have made applying for a Diversity Visa or other student visa highly desirable and a part of common topic of conversation among Nepalis. Sona remembered, “In Nepal, everyone would say, “America!” like it was this amazing place, so we applied for a DV,” (A. Joshi 2014). Aadi’s words not only highlight the culture of migration that is present in Nepal but also the prestige
that is associated with coming to the US.

When I spoke with Ashmi about her extended family, she was concerned that so much of her family was leaving. She explained, “I’ve got one cousin here [US], then one in Australia. And then there’s another cousin in Nepal that’s a doctor, yet he wants to go to New York for his residency. It’s all about prestige and being able to say ‘I’m going to the US,’” (Mool 2014). Ashmi seemed confused that her cousins wanted to leave what they had established in Nepal and worked so hard for, all to come to the US. From her viewpoint, it had become such a large trend to go to America that it became normalized and expected for those with the economic means and intelligence (assuming they achieve a certain level in schooling) to branch out and expand their knowledge from the cobwebbed books that are taught in Nepal in favor of being in a progressive and developed education system.

Roshni’s entire family moved to the US because her father had applied for a student visa, hoping to get the chance to work on a master’s degree in the US. Interestingly, her father had already received his masters in biology in Kathmandu and was a working professor at a university, yet the level of excellence associated with a masters degree in the US appealed to him enough to move his family with him to pursue his dream. The prestige that is associated with America is a huge draw for Nepali immigrants who hear of success and opportunity, yet this ideal is not always what results.

In addition to the culture of migration becoming common knowledge, another factor influencing Nepalis is the media. For Surya, his journey began when his mother heard an ad for a scholarship opportunity to study in the capital. “It was my mother’s determination that got me to school in Kathmandu. She took an oath that she would change the world without anyone else’s help, and I think she’s doing that through me,” (Bista 2014). For those that were already living in
Kathmandu, they learned of opportunities abroad through attending English boarding schools, private academies, and through agencies that provide help with applications and visas.

While migration has shown that it improves economic circumstances of those who leave their home country, it is important to consider how increasing international migration affects development, growth, inequality, and reliance on remittances for the country of origin. Borjas’ study of US immigrants in 2002 calculated that “13 percent of foreign students went on to become US permanent resident aliens”, suggesting that 87 percent of foreign-born students receiving schooling in the US returned home (or went to other countries)” (qtd. in Rosenzweig 2005: 8). However, Rosenzweig references the 2009 NIS (New Immigrant Survey) data that indicates the number of foreign students that remain in the US is much larger than this thirteen percent. Rosenzweig illustrates “many former US student visa holders transition to another temporary visa or become illegal by overstaying before becoming permanent resident aliens” and interestingly, “the highest-skill immigrants were the ones most likely to have obtained US schooling” representing 20.2 percent of foreign-born residents (Rosenzweig 2005: 8). For those Nepali students that had come to the US on a student visa, they attest that once their visas are up, they will head back to Nepal. Yet when I asked if they wanted to remain in the US, a few students admitted that if they could, they would like to try and pursue getting a work visa to continue building their experience in the field.

Among the students I interviewed, recurring themes of migration for reasons of political stability, job security, and educational opportunity are of utmost importance. Madhav reflected, “The political situation, it’s bad. There’s no laws, no system; nothing is stable there,” (Dhakal 2014). For Amita, much of the incentive to come to the US lies in her dreams to pursue more challenging academic opportunities. Amita explained, “The government schools are bad and
there’s strikes so they’re never open. So I always wanted to go to the US to study. My parents wanted me to go to India, but I was looking forward to the type of education in the US where I can study what I want: psychology,” (Karnali 2014). In Rajesh’s case, he came to the US out of curiosity, knowing that there was excitement and opportunity in education halfway around the world. He explained, “I saw a lot of my older cousins going—everywhere from Harvard to basic community colleges—and when I was six to seven years old, my cousins would send me applications encouraging me to go. I always knew I wanted to go to the US,” (Kunwar 2014). Similarly, Madhav “came to the US because of the political situation. In Nepal there are no laws, there’s no system, nothing is stable there. There’s no other option than an NGO or working at a government office,” (Dhakal 2014). The trends among students that migrated to the US encompass reasons related to political stability and job security as well as wanting to be a part of the culture of migration that students’ friends and families shared for years.

i. “We came here for you”

“We came here for you,” (Malla 2014). Santosh’s words emphasize the commitment that many Nepali youth make as their families uprooted from Nepal for reasons including educational opportunity. The notion that families sacrificed everything to immigrate for the sake of their children is not novel for Nepali students in the US to hear from their parents. Often the child of an immigrant family hears from their parents, “we came here for you,” bringing a weight of responsibility and sometimes a sense of guilt upon the child. For Nepali students in general, this message is repeated often, etched into their minds and hearts, a constant reminder of the futures they must make for their parents’ sacrifice and hard work. Most of the students who came to the US with their families felt this push and pressure from their families’ sacrifice and hard work and
therefore had a strong desire to perform well in school. Aadi shared, “College wasn’t even a question. It was expected for me to go. My mom said, ‘You have to go, you have no choice.’ So she expects me to be a doctor or engineer,” (A. Joshi 2014). In her mother’s eyes, Aadi’s family came to the US for the opportunities of a better life in America, part of which include education and achieving academic success. Santosh expressed a similar opinion about Nepali parents. He explained, “Most parents say after they come here, ‘we did this for you, for your education’ but that’s not completely true,” (Malla 2014). In Santosh’s eyes, parents come here not just for their kids, but also for their own dreams and safety and wants parents to remember that. Such reminders continue to fuel students to work hard, earn good grades, and prove to their parents that their hard work, sacrifice, and dedication to their children is all worth it in the end.

ii. The DV

Known colloquially as “The DV,” the Diversity Visa Program has become one of the most common means of entry to the US for Nepali immigrants. A congressionally mandated lottery program for receiving a permanent US residency card, the DV lottery began in 1995 as a part of the Immigration Act of 1990, meant to diversify immigrants to the US by “granting 55,000 diversity visas (DV) annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States” (Embassy of Nepal 2014). Every DV applicant must have either a “high school diploma or equivalent education” or “two years of work experience within the past five years in an occupation requiring at least two years’ training or experience” (ibid). Each of the students whose families came to the US on a DV were unsure if it was based on education or work experience, however, based on the US Embassy’s website, it would seem unlikely unless their parents worked in a specific field. The Embassy’s website cautions, “Very few people qualify for
the DV based on their work experience. You must have work experience identified by the US Department of Labor. Most of these jobs require an equivalent of a US university degree.” As a result, the majority of DVs granted are to relatively non-technical yet educated Nepalis.

While reasons for migrating to Nepal typically revolve around educational and economic opportunity, some students shared that the DV simply represented an opportunity out. The way the program operates as a lottery system makes the application process relatively risk-free. While it does not cost money to apply, it requires a lot of paperwork, a certain level of literacy and skill, and patience to complete. In regards to the DV, Santosh told me, “My dad filled out the form ‘just cause.’ He wanted to travel and all that,” (Malla 2014). Similarly, Aadi’s mother “just applied and we got it” and then decided to accept the visas and move to the US (A. Joshi 2014). Part of the culture of migration that I discussed earlier, the DV is becoming common knowledge and for many families that have the minimum requirements to apply, it seems like an interesting thing to do, consequently many individuals decide to take a shot. These experiences reveal that there are people involved in migration out of Nepal that do not see improvements in the general state of the country’s development. As some families and individuals seek out alternatives to life in Nepal, the US DV program is a challenging, yet open door.

Facebook is currently utilized by many Nepalis to learn about the DV, share experiences, and connect with others involved in the application process. There is a Facebook page titled “DV Lottery in Nepal” where Nepali people ask questions such as “when will i [sic] get result of EDV 2014” and “how many candidates will be select for 2015 dv lottery?” (“DV Lottery in Nepal”). In addition, the webpage gives status updates as on November 14, 2013, “DV Lottery in Nepal” posted “All we can say now is Best of Luck for 2015 EDV.” As the Embassy operates this webpage, I cannot help but question if the information that is given is truly helpful and
informative for applicants, or if it is a means of calming people as they patiently wait to hear of their future fate. Regardless, the webpage has almost 3,000 ‘likes’ and features an assortment of photos of applications and how applicants should expect the visa to appear.

Rajesh learned a lot about applying for a student visa through an office in Kathmandu called United States Education Foundation (USEF). At USEF, Rajesh was able to learn about the student visa and find colleges that met his criteria for a small school, liberal arts, and offered business as a major. He explained, “I applied as an international student to 20 colleges. I was accepted to 7 or 8, but only 3 or 4 offered me financial aid. USEF definitely helped me apply,” (Kunwar 2014). As one visits the US Embassy’s website, information on how to apply for the DV from USEF and other resources are available. Nepalis looking to learn more about the US can consult these resources and the ways to study, travel, or work abroad. As he told me of the many resources available to Nepalis that assist in sending citizens overseas, I could not help but consider what sort of relationship existed between the US and Nepal. The relationship between the two countries cannot be explained through any sort of colonial past, yet the DV brings into question if there is a colonial present that is at play. Liechty explains:

Because Nepal was one of the few Third World countries in the “post-colonial era” that did not have a colonial past, it became one of the favorite sites for Western experiments with wave after wave of “development ideologies” and programs. Between 1951 and 1997 Nepal received an estimated 3.7 billion USD in grants and loans from foreign countries and international banks. (Liechty 2003: 48)

As a site for “development ideologies”, the US has a history of economic assistance in Nepal from USAID supporting “agriculture, health, family planning, environmental protection, democratization, governance, and hydropower development efforts in Nepal” along with support through its peace process. I cannot help but consider how this relationship coupled with the US Embassy’s DV program may represent a form of postcolonial encounter. Utilizing a postcolonial
approach, Gupta and Ferguson ask the question, “does the colonial encounter create a ‘new culture’ in both the colonized and colonizing country, or does it destabilize the notion that nations and cultures are isomorphic?” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 35). To this question, I consider the ways in which Nepali middle class people have constructed a new identity in response to globalization and modernity and how Nepali immigrant families and youth have also created their own imagined communities abroad. While the cultures that emerge are not ‘new’ they are certainly constructed from the relationship that exists between the US and Nepal. Not only heavily swayed by the US, Nepali politics and society has been the “victim of external influence,” that has not allowed for Nepal to construct much of its own development (“The semi-colonial feeling” 2012). International forces have been so heavy handed in Nepal’s development since the country’s opened doors welcomed foreign aid, and the US has certainly been a large actor.

In a recent interview, Jhalak Subedi, Chairperson of the Nepal South Asian Center linked the issues of sovereignty, colonialism, and imperialism in relation to Nepali migrants abroad. Subedi said, “Migrant workers abroad is a part of globalization, which also has, to an extent, weakened the boundaries of sovereignty. It’s a matter of labour and capitalism” (“The semi-colonial feeling” 2012). In his experience, the British India Company’s relationship with the Gorkha Army and recruiting young Nepali men to fight for other countries abroad is the real non-colonial colonial relationship that Nepal should be concerned about. While the British-Nepali semi-colonial relationship is still in place with Gorkha army men recruited each year, it is hard to deny the benefits and control the US Embassy has as its supposed random lottery chooses from some of the most educated and skilled individuals in Nepal and extracts them to the US. None of the interviewees could share how the DV process worked and no one knew if the system
was fair. Regardless of Nepal’s relative colonial past and present, it cannot be denied that the US has a significant amount of control over large sectors of Nepal’s society and economy; the DV is just one of the means in which power is exercised.

**B. Transitions**

Upon arrival in the US, students faced a number of transitions while adjusting to school, language, culture, and a different way of living. For some students, these transitions were much simpler and easy from early exposure to Western culture via American films, music, television, and stories from family members that had traveled. Others, typically those that arrived in the US at a young age with their families, struggled with learning English and adjusting to an entirely new environment. The quotes below are commentary on transitions, first impressions, and differences between the US and Nepal that interviewees felt were important to share. Understanding the different concerns and impressions students have can help shed light on some of the natural products of migration.

Prabin: *The people are so different. Nepal is open, you play. Here, it’s always closed doors. Luckily our apartment complex had open doors with Nepali families, so it kind of felt like home... The environment is cleaner, there’s water and light and life is much easier. You’re not worried about disease or health.*

Anita: *I’m a twin- we relied on each other a lot. The US is a terrifying place. School helps you adjust, but learning English is challenging. Weekends aren’t the same because family isn’t always here... We became more American after our little sister was born.*

Aadi: *My expectation of America was New York City. But then I came to Boulder, haha. Elementary school is so easy here; there’s no homework and everyone is nice and welcoming. In Nepal school is so intense.*

Santosh: *In Nepal I didn’t need an alarm clock; class didn’t start till ten... Over here Nepalese people don’t really talk to Nepalese people because everything is so busy... After we came here it wasn’t that amazing. It was easier and the facilities were nice, but it can be lonely. You work so many more hours here.*

Deepa: *It was hard. I picked up English within a year, but I didn’t like school at first because it was hard to communicate. It became easier when I went to Casey Middle*
School, which is so much more diverse than my elementary school, which was all white.

Karuna: I hated high school. People didn’t understand what I was trying to say. I would understand them. I was really introverted. I guess, my own enemy. High school counselors and teachers were so friendly and they made it clear if there’s something you want to say that you can talk. I’m still in touch with some of them. They helped me plan out my future.

Surya: Immigration was hard. You see yourself as a brown guy. I was taken into a different room and questioned. Why is it so different for different people? I was let down by this, but I found great people right away and it was really uplifting.

Rajesh: With globalization and Westernization, I had a lot of prior knowledge about America. When I came here I found that people are extremely nice, helpful, and generous and I was overwhelmed... It was a culture shock to drink from the tap and to go to a college dance.

Sharing students’ voices, we can get a sense of the ranging challenges that Nepali youth have to face when transitioning to life in the US. Surya and Rajesh’s experiences have a less to do with language and more with cultural adjustments. It is possible that because these two migrated to the US on student visas, they had already proven a certain level of language proficiency and did not have to adjust to more fundamental development that the other students faced at a young age in a new place.

C. Diversity among Student Immigrants

I have brought up differences among Nepali student youth and touched upon the interviewee population’s diversity in terms of their age of arrival and education level, caste and class, and home city or village. Through the chart below, I hope to illustrate some of the differences among students to show the diversity of those coming to the US from Nepal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female: 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Undergraduate: 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Arrival</td>
<td>Average age: 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youngest: 4
Oldest: 25

Castes & Ethnic Groups: Brahmin, Chhetri, Newari

Home in Nepal:
- Kathmandu Valley: 10
- Rural/Village: 7

State in US:
- Colorado: 13
- New Hampshire: 2
- Maine: 1
- North Carolina: 1

Visa to the US:
- DV: 4
- Student visa: 5
- Parent’s student or work visa: 8

D. Imagined Communities

“There are a lot of Nepali people here I consider family. I call them ‘Aunt’ and ‘Uncle’, and their kids my brothers and sisters,” (Mool 2014). Ashmi’s sentiments about the Nepali community that has formed and grown in Boulder reveal her attachment to individuals that may have been strangers back in Nepal. It is through finding people who have a common culture, common language, and common sense of values that Nepalis have created their own imagined communities abroad. These communities include expatriates, students abroad, and immigrants. Ashmi explained this phenomenon and commented, “It’s interesting. If you know someone here that’s Nepali then you have an in [to the community.] It’s because you’re Nepali that you can be connected. It also helps keep the culture when someone’s there that understands it,” (ibid).

Beyond the community of Nepalis that has formed in Boulder, there are other networks of Nepalis growing all around the US, particularly around urban areas and research universities. According to the US Department of Homeland Security, in 2010 7,115 persons from Nepal obtained legal permanent resident status. The highest representation of these persons is found in Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, and Virginia (“2010
In addition, Nepali youth find other ways of belonging and retaining their culture through student groups such as the Nepali Student Association or international student clubs. In order to get a perspective on the formation of these imagined communities and how Nepalis have constructed such strong groups and identities away from their home country, I turn to the literature.

When it comes to notions of “the imagined,” “the local,” and “the culture of difference,” I turn to Benedict Anderson (1983), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Gupta and Ferguson (1992), and Aihwa Ong (1999). Such studies stress the importance of these concepts for the construction of national and political identities, the impact of globalization, and the ways in which people create communities.

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s 1992 essay “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference” can be used to explain this phenomenon by which Nepalis are seeking imagined communities. In this article, they argue that, “today, the rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people combines with the refusal of cultural products and practices to ‘stay put’ to give a profound sense of a loss of territorial roots, or an erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places, and of ferment in anthropological theory” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9). As an attempt to preserve culture and bring familiar practices to an unfamiliar place, many Nepalis feverously cling to their national identity. There is a culture of difference in America that makes "other-ness" (or "doubleness" as Benedict Anderson says) a very real lived experience as an immigrant, a culture in which having a distinct cultural identity and sense of nationalism reinforces one's identity and discerns an attainable community. Culture is not bound by borders, but can rather be molded, taken, and transferred by way of peoples. The people who cross borders more or less permanently—immigrants, refugees, exiles, and expatriates—may
especially encounter a disjuncture of culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 34). Within immigrant populations, it is especially evident that the mapping of cultures is an impossible task to complete, as this specific localization undermines the culture and differences within individuals that bring culture with them. The phenomenon of moving cultures is explained by Gupta and Ferguson in that “In a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of populations, old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of postcolonial simulacra, doublings and redoublings” (38). As Gupta and Ferguson found years ago, there is a doubling of culture that Nepali students and their families recreate in the US. Examples of such recreations of culture are seen through the imagined communities established in Boulder, Boston, North Carolina, and other civic areas.

Benedict Anderson coined the phrase “imagined community” in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, through distinguishing that a community by its very function is not a concept that can be located on a map, rather is socially constructed by those members that identify themselves as a part of that group. Another phenomenon that he explores is the concept of nationalism, an ideology that he links to the New World (US) for its distinct “doubleness.” Anderson writes, “'Doubleness’ of the Americas and the reasons for it, help to explain why nationalism emerged first in the New World, not the Old” (Anderson 1983: 195). As it relates to this study, Nepalis cling to their national identity through the culture of difference and "other-ness" (or "doubleness" as Anderson says) in a context in which having a distinct cultural identity and sense of nationalism reinforces one's identity and discerns an attainable community. Thus, Nepali immigrants in the US choose to retain much of their culture through establishing imagined communities of Nepalis abroad.

Taking a lesson from Anderson, Aihwa Ong develops his critique of shifting relations of
the nation-state and builds upon it through paying attention instead to, “the transnational practices and imaginings of the nomadic subject and the social conditions that enable his flexibility” [emphasis in original] (3). From Ong’s 1999 work, I apply the concept of a transnational imagined community to Nepali immigrants in the US in 2014 and understand the “economic rationality that encourages family emigration or the political rationality that invites foreign capital” (5). In the American neoliberal system, capitalism and globalization have contributed to what Ong refers to as a “political consciousness of difference” that not only acts to distinguish Nepalis from Americans, but also has an effect of bringing Nepalis together in their unique difference.

Conversely, this “political consciousness of difference” also has a way of bringing ‘the other’ (Said 1978) closer together, lumping Nepalis with other South Asian immigrants in the US. After arriving in Boulder, Aadi’s family began running a gift shop in the local mall that sold Nepali and Tibetan goods. As I asked Aadi about her family’s business she admitted, “The store was going well for years, but now it’s a kiosk. We had a Christmas store on Pearl Street once, but it was hard.” (A. Joshi 2014). Aadi’s family is not the only one to experience challenging times as many students shared stories of their memories as their parents worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, many of which are below their level of education and skill set. Nancy Foner’s look at immigration as a transnational phenomenon explains this challenge as:

Many immigrants today experience downward occupational mobility due to America’s non-recognition of professional certificates earned outside the US. As a result, many Nepalis with higher degrees earned in Nepal are compelled to take low-skilled jobs in the secondary labour market or to work in South Asian communities. Job instability, low pay, and the need for jobs in ethnic neighbourhoods increase migrants’ dependency on their ethnic network, compelling them to live in ethnic enclaves. Given the relatively new nature of Nepalese migration and the abundance of pre-existing and incoming South Asians, these Nepalis often become part of the South Asian enclave.” (qtd. in Bohra-Mishra 2011: 1533)
This cultural shift and alignment of South Asian immigrants in the US is evidenced in the Indian-Tibetan-Nepali stores and restaurants around Boulder whose mismatched Hindu and Buddhist decorations seem natural for the average American. While for some, these ventures can be quite successful, for others it is a large investment that can be quite risky financially. Sunita, who moved in 1997 with her family to Aurora, Colorado remembers, “My parents were each doing two to three jobs at first. I have the utmost respect for them,” (Hamal 2014). Arjun’s parents experienced the same devaluation of their hard work and skills after coming to Boulder as he shared, “It was sixteen hours a day. My parents worked two jobs each. My dad wants to work long enough to be able to retire,” (Rana 2014).

Even though his parents did not have this experience directly, Santosh is conscious of the devaluation of one’s degree and skills upon moving to US from Nepal. “People who come get paid minimum wage and work two to three jobs to survive. So the kids have daycare or they stay with their grandparents,” Santosh explains. Sunita highlights the problem precisely when she explains that many Nepalis are migrating to the US due to the perception that America is easy and, “Everyone owns a car, is rich, and works. But then they come so easily not having any appreciation for what it took families fifteen years ago to get education and family here. Once they come, they realize it’s not that easy,” (Hamal 2014). Many families have experienced challenges living in America and have seen first-hand how the transnational phenomenon plays out. As a result, many have begun to find new ways to share resources and knowledge with other Nepalis both in-person and online.

In the 1980s, social-cultural anthropologists such as Arjun Apparurai turned toward studying “the local” as a means of recognizing the human agency involved in globalization process. Appadurai argues, “such a ‘global production of locality’ happens because transnational
flows of people, goods, and knowledge become imaginative resources for creating communities and ‘virtual neighborhoods’” (4). Such a virtual neighborhood can be seen through a simple Google search on “Nepali community in US”, which elicits over 1,030,000 results. On each of these websites exists a plethora of resources, guides, stories, contacts, and links to other useful sites for people to utilize. The website Sajha.com’s mission relays “In an effort to help out Nepali students, sajha.com is in the process of creating a new student section whereby, as a Nepali student in the US, you can help other potential Nepali students by entering some information about your college so that they can make better decisions regarding their college selections.” This online Nepali community and others have a high level of site participation and comments with relevant immigration, visa, and green card information. The targeted reader audiences of sites such as this are Nepalis who are considering emigrating, those who have recently moved to the US, or even those that have grown up Nepali-American and are seeking resources connecting them back to Nepal. These websites also are essential for many Nepali families who have taken root in the US and want to stay in touch with their relatives. Based on the presence of the multitude of support sites for Nepalis both in and out of the US, it is safe to conclude that there is a demand for information and a need for a connection with other Nepalis that have gone through or are currently going through a similar situation, whether it is culture shock, assimilation, or somewhere in between.

Another space for Nepali youth to create imagined communities is at their institutions, where other likeminded students can meet. At the University of Colorado at Boulder campus where my research began, I first reached out to Prabin who is an active member in CU’s Nepali Student Association (NSA). The NSA is a group for Nepali students to meet and “promote diversity, awareness, and co-operation,” (Nepalese Student Association). Suman, Nepali
sophomore, feels that NSA represents a place where, “Being Nepali helped me. I really enjoy friendship with people from Nepal. I can make small references and be myself.” As Benedict and Gupta and Ferguson found, the imagined communities provide spaces in which individuals find comfort in identifying themselves as a part of a group. In Roshni’s case, she was hesitant to join NSA as she wanted to be more than just Nepali as she had enough of it at home. Roshni admitted, “I didn’t want to join at first. But I went with a friend and then I had a lot of fun. All my close friends were a part of it and it was nice not being in the engineering environment. We can talk about parent issues and all relate to that,” (Lohani 2014). In this sense, Roshni found the NSA to be less of a celebration or display of her Nepali culture, but more of a way for her to find an outlet beyond home and school and to connect to individuals going through similar experiences.

Students that migrated to the US on their own specifically for education each expressed their initial interest in diversifying their communities and expressed their interest in befriending other international students. Similar to Nepali immigrant parents associating with other South Asian immigrants, these students found connections with international students as they shared similar experiences of acculturation and culture shock. Madhav shared:

I volunteered for the Office of International Students as a group leader. I helped answer questions to make it easier for other international students. Different languages made it challenging but today I have friends from all over the world: Israel, China, Thailand, and more. It’s good because I learn how different communities work. It’s a chance to learn.

Madhav’s desire to help and to share his experiences to make others’ transitions a little smoother than his shows the empathy that emerged from his personal experience as an international student. A trend among the student visa population in terms of community formation relates to their desire to branch out and learn. It seems to me that these students who came without their families have a greater understanding of the opportunity they have in the US and hope to gain as
much experience from college life as they can.

Amita explained how she formed her community at her university and admitted, “First it was difficult to blend in. I was always with the internationals—we had to arrive two weeks early and attend our own separate orientation—because it was easy. I used to always stick to the international group, but in my second year I have classes with different people,” (Karnali 2014). When I asked Amita about her involvement in the NSA at Colby-Sawyer College, she excitedly relayed, “We’re fifty Nepali students from sixteen initially. There’s a huge community we’ve formed here. You can never get away! I didn’t like it at the beginning because I didn’t know if I should be friends with only Nepali people, but I think it’s a good thing because I can always talk with them and they understand,” (ibid). The need for understanding seems to be one of the defining factors among all the communities that have sprung up around the US involving Nepali immigrants. There is a strong desire to have one’s voice be heard and to have others relate to personal stories. While Amita and Madhav have experienced many interactions with non-Nepali students that have become great friendships, they both admitted that there is something unique about being able to talk with another Nepali. That common sense of place that cannot be forgotten or placed on a map that Gupta and Ferguson grapple with seems to be the culture that Nepali immigrant students yearn for and create for themselves in their imagined communities in the USA.
CHAPTER V: Student Voices & Family Ties
V. Student Voices & Family Ties

A. Identity

In her 2001 work *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*, Laura Ahearn’s main theoretical focus is agency. Ahearn’s unique ethnographic look at love letters written by young people in Nepal in the 1990s explains how “in the context of the state’s nationalist and development discourse and local consumer-market forces” an altered sense of agency is fostered (Ahearn 2001: 198). As a result of this altered sense of agency, people come to understand themselves, via modernity and globalization, as dynamic individuals with the ability to improve or transform themselves. She writes, “as a result, young people increasingly interpret events or express hopes for the future, through notions of individual choice, direct action, planning, and so on, rather than as matters of fate or karma” (ibid). While on the surface, Ahearn’s focus is on love, the ways that young people interpret their lives and their decisions is what I find relevant and useful here. As love is “an empowering force, one that gives them [youth] a sense of personal agency and the ability to overcome future obstacles,” this developed sense of personhood, agency, and cultural value emerge to give us the Nepali youth of today (ibid). It is these youth that have been born in a modern Nepal influenced by development and nationalist discourses, that are conceiving of their identity and agency.

The anthropologist Aiwha Ong grapples with modern developments of citizenship and transnationality in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logistics of Transnationality*. Ong’s work is a significant contribution to studies on globalization and immigration, the methods and discussions of which can be applied to this project on Nepali students in the US over a decade later. Although Ong utilizes the ethnic Chinese immigrant as her subject, she describes a general, “multiple-passport holder as an apt contemporary figure; he or she embodies the split between
state-imposed identity and personal identity caused by upheavals, migration, and changing global markets,” (Ong 1999: 2). She questions how anthropologists are to handle issues of cultural reproduction and identity formation in light of globalization and modernity. Ong developed the concept of “flexible citizenship” by which migrants assert their citizenship for economic reasons rather than to identify with political allegiance or citizenship. In the case of Nepali youth in the US, many use different forms of capital through their flexible status and are able to utilize, “their flexible strategies of accumulation in both economic and cultural senses,” (Ong 199: 88). In this way, Nepalis become agents actively shaping their identities in a cross-cultural context.

There are multitudes of ways in which Nepali youth construct their identities. Most place themselves in relation to their families, their country or origin, and their current life state. As it relates to a sense of self, I argue that Nepali youth are very aware of the complexity of their identities that is often multi-layered, mixed, divided, and flexible. For some students, their sense of self and identity are still being formed. Their cultural identity and personal identities are conflated, which leaves a few students confused and unsure while others accept the multiple selves that exist as parts of their identity.

Immigrating to the US at a young age under the arms of parents, the students that migrated having little experience growing up in Nepal tend to have a close relationship with their parents and consequently, their identities and futures are tied closely to their parents’ desires. For example, when I asked Ashmi about her identity, she said that being a student was very important to her as it was her lived experience day to day. “I’m also a daughter and a sister. I’m really close with my family. I’d also say that ethnically, I’m Nepali-American. Being female is also important,” (Mool 2010). Ashmi also revealed to me that while she identifies as Nepali-American, she might have a greater attachment to Nepal if there wasn’t such a huge age gap in
her family. Had she been able to relate to more family in Nepal who were her age, she might have made more of an effort to keep in touch and thinks she may have connected on a different level. Growing up in America, Ashmi, “used to say ‘I don’t want to be Nepali. I want to be American.’ I was never interested in the culture and traditions. But as I’ve grown up, I’ve realized that there are parts of myself that I don’t know about. So I’m curious,” (ibid). For many of the students who grew up mostly in the US, their curiosity has manifested itself in the form of a proud sense of nationalism that I will detail below.

In Aadi’s case, living with her parents throughout college has prevented her from really forming her own identity. Sona hesitated:

I definitely respect my parents, but I have my own ideas and I want to be independent. I want to mature in my own way. But in Nepali culture, you don’t leave parents until you get married. I feel like I haven’t experienced as much as I really want to. I’ve never really discovered myself as much. I’ve always done what they want. (A. Joshi 2014).

Although Aadi’s frustration was evident, when I asked about things that really mattered to her she lit up and said, “Dance. I used to be part of a dance crew. But my parents wanted me to focus on my studies. They said, ‘You can’t make a career of that,’” (ibid).

Anita spoke much more positively about her own identity, telling me about how being Nepali-American and a student are two important identifiers for her. When she spoke of her major and career path, she told me, “I’m studying international affairs and philosophy. It all leads to international law… I take my family’s comments into consideration. While I would love to be an art history major, it’s not practical and my family doesn’t approve as much,” (A. Bisht 2014). Although Anita’s future path is clear to her, there is a slight tension between what she ultimately wants and what is practical, which she admitted is almost certainly influenced by the expectation in Nepali culture that, “you have to major in IPHY (integrative physiology), engineering, business” to be successful (ibid). There is clarity in Anita’s voice about the
difference between being genuinely interested in pursuing something as opposed to being encouraged to do it because of one’s family.

Anita and Aadi both constructed their identities while growing up close to their families and spending a majority of their lives in the US. Yet, Deepa has a unique experience in that she first traveled to the US at the age of seven, but was forced to return to Nepal at twelve with her younger brother to attend boarding school and then returning to the US for high school and college. She revealed, “Religion is important to me. I suppose being preserved and going back [to Nepal] helped me speak, read, and write Nepali. I’m a Nepali and I don’t hesitate to say that. I’m also an American citizen. I was born and raised in Nepal but I do value America as a country,” (Mahat 2014). When I asked of her future goals and plans, she expressed her desire to use her major in communications and minor in religion and women’s studies to get her teaching license. “If I could travel, I would want to see the ways other women can live. Going back to Nepal, I realized that women will absorb all the pain. I felt bad with the situation and it really triggered me,” Deepa declared. Deepa’s multiple perspectives and periods of being in both the US and Nepal during different stages of development have produced an interesting identity that is particularly complex and layered. She admitted, “I’m happy to have returned. I learned about my own culture and language. If I hadn’t gone back, I don’t know if I’d have an identity,” (ibid).

For Deepa, returning had a restorative effect on her identity. For Aadi, returning restored her love for her family and culture, yet did not have quite the same effect on identity. Conversely, her return reaffirmed memories of Nepal as being politically unsafe and relatively underdeveloped as she contrasted living conditions to those in the US. As both women re-entered their country of birth, they reacted differently to Nepal and saw the country in a different way, reflecting the unfixed nature of identity construction. Some return with heightened appreciation
for Nepal while others are only reminded of the “modernity” and “development” discourses they heard before and had left behind.

**B. Nationalism/Patriotism**

Scholars have written of the deleterious effects of development as an ideology as they point to feelings of inadequacy, backwardness, and victim status for those citizens in developing countries. There is criticism of the use of the term “underdeveloped”, as it implies inferiority to developed countries as well as the assumption that development along traditional Western models of economic development and political stability are desired. While the UN has termed Nepal as a “developing” nation, none of these feelings of victim status were present in students’ sentiments toward their own identity as a Nepali. In fact, students’ reactions were entirely the opposite as they openly expressed their “Nepaliness.” These new immigrants have their own personal and cultural dynamics that are unique to their generation.

When I asked interviewees the question, “What are some of the most important aspects to your identity?” every student’s answers included being Nepali. Even among those who arrived at quite a young age like Anita expressed, “I am proud to be Nepali,” (A. Bisht 2014) and Santosh said, “I’ll always be Nepali. The things I like and do are a mixture of Nepali and American, but being Nepali is important to me,” (Malla 2014). A few students also mentioned that being from Nepal is a characteristic that also makes them unique. Sunita said, “I’m patriotic about my country. I wear t-shirts with the Nepal flag on them. I want people to know. It seems a little strange, but I’ve always wanted my kid to be born in Nepal. I want them to be able to say ‘Yeah, I’m from Nepal.’ I think that would be so amazing,” (Hamal 2014). Sunita’s strong sense of patriotism to Nepal demonstrates her care and attachment to her home country. This strong sense of nationalism and pride in identifying as a Nepali is an interesting phenomenon.
I interpret this nationalism as one of the consequences of coming of age in America. The majority of Nepalis who migrated to the US in the decades preceding the 1990s did so to study as postgraduate students. Small in number and high in educational accomplishments, this population:

Hastened their assimilation into the English-speaking, mainstream American culture. Often their children lost Nepali and even frowned upon the Nepali culture. Save for their skin colour, they are thoroughly Americanised. Many have lost a sense of a distinct Nepaliness within South Asia, preferring to marry white Americans or other South Asians or whomever, to the heartache and headache of their educated parents. (Bohra-Mishra 2011: 1529)

While earlier generations of Nepali immigrants were quick to assimilate to American culture, the Nepali youth of today are allowed much more cultural freedom as they “are bilingual, more at ease with and fluent in both American and Nepali cultures. They speak Nepali at home with parents, on the phone with grandparents back in Nepal and with the children of other new immigrant families” (ibid). The strong sense of “Nepaliness” is what has contributed to modern patriotism and a renewed sense of Nepali identity that lacked in previous immigrant generation populations.

A possible explanation for this strong “Nepaliness” is that the Nepali culture has been romanticized for the new generation. For Nepali first generation immigrant youth, the majority of stories they hear of Nepal come from their parents and grandparents who tell of life from that generation’s perspective. With Nepali student’s grandparents, they hear of tales when the culture was strong and from voices whose home is always in Nepal. The parents of these Nepali immigrants, by contrast, know how hard life is back in Nepal and chose to migrate their family to the US in the first place in order to live a different life. For many parents, while life in the US may be easier educationally and in regards to healthcare, it is often much more challenging to consider the thought of return to life. As mentioned earlier, both Ashmi and Arjun’s fathers
expressed a desire to remain in the US in fear that returning to Nepal will present them with no opportunity. Although these students hear their parents’ perspectives, this does not mean that they cannot enjoy claiming a Nepali identity from the safety and supposed security of the US. This last generation is then subject to this romanticized version of Nepal, who sees their family’s culture, language, and county as unique markers in a context (America) where being unique is desirable. As America is a country of immigrants, Nepali youth are able to share their immigrant experiences with each other and among their peers, while maintaining their Nepali identity abroad.

C. Perceived Problems

   i. Losing Culture

   As is the struggle for students to negotiate their personal desires and parents’ expectations, Nepali youth also have to face the possibility of losing their Nepali culture. Although every interviewee expressed their overwhelming sense of nationalism as they identified as Nepali in some way, there is still this fear that parents have that their children will forget the language, religious practices, and other norms. Common among many immigrant populations, parents often take measures to speak only in their native language at home and require their children to take part in cultural celebrations. What parents may also not realize is their fears are shared by their children as students are aware of Nepal’s problems. Immigration has greatly affected students’ identity formation and future goals, particularly as students’ respect for parents’ sacrifice and hard work is evident.

   “My parents are scared that we’re going to lose the culture and the language, but I feel the same way,” Prabin admitted. Prabin’s desire to maintain his Nepali identity is challenging, however, as American and Nepali cultures sometimes bring him to personal conflict:
While I try to be me wherever I go, there’s definitely a difference between me at home versus me at an American gathering. When I’m with Nepali people I respect my elders, but there can be a lot of gossip so I’m more guarded. Sometimes I hate it because it’s difficult to have their respect as an adult. When I’m with American people, I try to share. I voice my opinions because that’s how the culture is. (Pokhrel 2014)

Similarly, Deepa wondered, “Maybe I’ve lost out on some opportunities because of my culture. Like traveling, staying out with friends, having guy friends,” (Mahat 2014). While Prabin and Deepa sometimes feel constrained by the overwhelming Nepali community that can get involved in youth’s lives, other students have experienced different senses of Nepali identity as a result of more freedom and independence. Part of this independence can be attributed to the process by which youth become politicized when entering college. Another possible explanation is differences in family structure and attachment to Nepali customs and traditions and how large a fear a loss of culture presents itself to parents and youth. Even for Aadi, she shared that college has given her the opportunity to explore and open up a little more. “In college, I’m trying new things. I joined NSA. I’m also in GlobeMed and I want to go and help with Himalayan Healthcare. I also went to a Helping Hands Nepal fundraiser and it was so inspiring. It would be so fun to go back [to Nepal] and build schools,” (A. Joshi 2014). Aadi’s exploration of her interests and identity also show some of the ways in which education has opened up more doors and possibilities for Nepali immigrant students in the US.

Arjun and Karuna are examples of students who have embraced their identities and explored possibilities beyond traditional roles Nepali youth are expected to fill while pursuing their education. Karuna’s identity is centered on being both Nepali and an artist. Hesitant to label herself or limit herself, Karuna said, “Everyone has their entire life planned out. But I want to go with the flow. As an artist I want to try new things and be creative,” (Chhetri 2014). In regard to her parents’ influence on her future Karuna told me that she is following her own plan, joking “I
told my parents I don’t want to be pressured. I want to choose. So I tell them ‘Oh well, you shouldn’t have brought me to America,’” (ibid). As Karuna jokes that her parents should not have brought her to America, it reveals the possibility that American culture encourages a sense of rebellion and independence. According to Karuna, she has the final say in her own life and her parents have nothing to blame than their move to the West.

When I asked Arjun about his exodus from Nepal, he admitted, “I should be thankful in a way,” (Rana 2014). He laughed as he explained, “Coming here my parents got a little less traditional. We actually talk back to our parents, and they started realizing they’re not always right. They’ve changed a lot since they came here and trust us,” (ibid). When I seemed surprised at this comment, Arjun followed up with his advice, “You have to take that first step or else you’ll never be free to do what you want,” (ibid). His words seemed so profound. Yet I also realized that both he and Karuna conveyed their parents’ openness with their childrens’ futures and identity formation. Arjun’s words reflect a deep understanding that not being heard and not living a life one truly desires is one of the most common (and in his opinion, deleterious) effects of being the child of a Nepali immigrant parent, whose fears of a lost Nepali culture can take over.

Liechty outlines how modern youth in Kathmandu are increasingly becoming a unique class of their own, taking on their own identities and problems. This new group of urban young people is, “trapped in the role of representing and fulfilling the hopes and dreams of middle-class families” (Liechty 2003: 211). As youth are torn between the needs of their parents, there is an increasing sense of “frustration, anxiety, confusion, desperation, and rage” that afflict modern Nepalis, a culture that I believe gets carried over when these youth live in the US. The same balancing act to be modern yet traditional as Pigg and Liechty found, exists in the US for Nepali
immigrant youth today. How students choose to negotiate that loss of culture may be varied whether it is through adamantly speaking Nepali at home, turning to religion, or through proudly sharing their culture with others. Yet in the end, the effect of this fear of losing culture amounts to a heightened sense of nationalism and proud desire to represent oneself as a Nepali.

ii. Advice

As students shared their personal identities, they revealed so much about what they wish they had known before coming to the US and what challenges they continue to face as they come of age in America. The advice that interviewees shared below reflects an array of perspectives about some of the most challenging aspects of being a Nepali that has been transplanted to the US. Much of their advice simply comes from years spent in the US while other bits are very personal and specific to the individual’s lived experience. Each student I talked to expressed how important it is to get a connection, to somehow maintain the Nepali identity they are unable to still naturally cultivate had they continued living in Nepal. I decided to include almost every student’s perspective to fulfill the interviewees’ requests that their advice be shared with other Nepali youth considering immigrating to the US for education or those that are migrating with their families. Here are their words of wisdom:

Prabin: *Keep the connection. Keep the culture. Get involved. Our generation just plays games, but if you stick with the older generation and make good choices it will help you feel less alone. Find the people, because there’s a supportive community out there... Don’t just think ‘it’s America, I want to go’ but really find someone you can connect to that’s Nepali to remind yourself every day of Nepal... Be sure to move back and help out the villages.*

Anita: *Try not to be so Americanized. The majority of Americans want to know about your culture. Embrace the US but don’t try and be American. Have your own identity with Nepali culture, you’ll respect it more. America is what it is because it’s a melting pot.*

Aadi: *Maybe don’t come to the US. Educate youth there and they’ll stay and build and grow. They have that spark to do something.*
Santosh: Stick to what you came here to do. It’s easy to think you’re alone if you don’t have a family. Don’t get distracted from why your parents came here. Kids are given an opportunity to study, so they should try to use it. They’re lucky.

Surya: Getting a DV to work? Don’t do it. Education? Go for it. It’s worth coming here. Come, learn, and take it back with you to create opportunities in Nepal. It’s needed back home.

Deepta: Don’t be too trusting. Don’t hesitate to ask questions. Learn English.

Karuna: Be yourself. It’s not a bad thing.

Roshini: It gets easier. I was homesick at first... For Nepali kids here, listen to your parents. You owe it to them. I’m going to be an engineer because of that and my parents really want me to succeed.

Reading through the advice of Nepali youth, themes that emerge include preserving culture, respecting parents, taking advantage of educational opportunity, and considering return to Nepal. This last bit of advice is interesting in that it conflicts with most students’ own personal desire to remain in the US. Understanding students’ perspectives on returning to Nepal can piece together the difference between what students say and what they actually want. While many students advise recent Nepali migrants or those study abroad to be sure to return, I found that when I flipped the question on them, most of my interviewees did not want to take their own advice.

D. Returning to Nepal

The thought of return is one that both excites and terrifies Nepali youth in the US today. To imagine being back in Nepal, surrounded by family, attending weddings and riding the bus to university, taking a chiyaa break in the afternoon is an idyllic recreation. While students feel fond about the thought of visiting Nepal, feelings are mixed about the purpose of returning, the duration of visits, and the prospect of staying indefinitely. In our conversation, when I added Anil Parajuli’s comment to the scenario—“Youth are the key to Nepal’s future”—their answers shifted, revealing that there is a difference between the advice they give and the advice they take.
Each time Menaka has returned to Nepal to visit, she has customarily visited all the members of her family, participated in big celebration of holidays, and done some tourist travel throughout the country. However, the impact her visits have on her identity is what is quite intriguing. Menaka professed, “My Nepali identity becomes stronger after returning from trips,” (M. Bisht 2014). Her renewed sense of “Nepaliness” upon her visits to Nepal is influential in constructing her multi-dimensional identity. Menaka’s returns to Nepal reaffirm an increased love and appreciation for her culture and country, yet not enough to inspire a permanent return to be one of the youth that Parajuli depicts as a leader in the future of Nepal’s development. For Menaka, returning is fun and a way to appreciate her birth country, yet the thought of returning to live and to have to adjust to the culture, to the lack of progress would be too challenging after having lived in the US. Menaka and so many other students shared their reservations and revealed why the thought of a permanent return is a challenging concept to grasp.

Initially, Karuna was excited when I asked her about returning to Nepal as she emphatically shared her personal bucket list with all the Nepali attractions she hoped to see. But when I asked about a possibly permanent return, she grew conflicted:

I’d never be able to live there. I plan to go back there and visit and appreciate Nepal. I hesitate with this. Youth have a lot of power, but they also have their own problems. I personally haven’t decided. I want to go back and make a change, yet you need a lot of patience and have to dedicate your life. What do you think about first? Nepal or your future? I’d love to be the person to help the community. If I ever get the vision I would follow up with it, but with the current situation in Nepal, where it’s not trying to change at all, it’s disheartening in a way. A lot of people think, ‘someone else will do it.’ (Chhetri 2014)

Karuna’s thought process hits Parajuli’s understanding of the paradox Nepali youth of today, right on the nose. It is challenging for youth to know of the problems at home and to see possible solutions. Some feel quite guilty about the situation, telling me they know how lucky they are to have the opportunity to be in the US, yet feel so immensely conflicted about their commitment to
Nepal or commitment to their own futures.

Some students could see a future that had intermittent long visits to Nepal in order to help the cause. Deepa shared that she could picture herself staying for longer termed periods, so long as they were not permanent moves. Her personal desire to help is evident as she told me, “I hope to go back and help communities, maybe stay for four years or so and work with a village. But I couldn’t stay the rest of my life,” (Mahat 2014). Sunita is very aware of the challenging predicament that Nepali youth of today face. She detailed the common struggle that youth face as they break down and claim, “I still love my people. I love my country. But I can’t change things,” (Hamal 2014). Aadi also seemed a little hopeless in her ability to make a difference. Remembering how challenging and eye-opening her return to her father’s village was she admitted, “Life would be difficult to go back to there. I have a lot of privileges here, but if I could go back and give it would be nice. But I also feel like I can fundraise. That’s all I can do,” (A. Joshi 2014).

Aadi’s words highlight an interesting solution that many Nepalis do not consider today: Nepali youth abroad can still impact their country without return. The prospect of helping Nepal’s development from halfway around the world is much more challenging logistically as youth are unable to communicate effectively and be on the ground. Yet, Aadi and other students’ involvement in Globe Med—in which students fundraise money to help build health centers and provide medical supplies to rural villages in Nepal—represents a significant step that students have actively taken in their role of helping develop Nepal. While Parajuli recognizes the immense impact his organization can have as a student group in America, he emphasized that returning to help is such a different form of help. Arjun’s future plan, however, is a possible rebuttal to Parajuli’s concerns.
When I asked Arjun about his plans to return, he smiled and admitted, “It’s a little crazy, but do you want to hear the plan my brother and I have?” (Rana 2014). As I nodded, he leaned in, explaining, “Youth want to change Nepal, but we have restrictions. We have to choose between money and opportunity and going back. But we also know about Nepal’s problems and we know to stay as far away from Nepal’s politics as possible, because we know they’re corrupt,” (Rana 2014). Arjun and his brother’s future plan is “to build a campaign. Hydro-electricity is huge in Nepal. There’s a lot of politics involved—India and China are in competition for this power—but no one wants to invest in Nepal. Our goal is to raise awareness about the huge water resource that Nepal has and talk with private companies to invest in this resource,” (ibid). Arjun’s goal is an innovative and creative approach to offering solutions to Nepal while abroad. His plan not only involves him using his education in the US as a backbone for his experience and knowledge, but also to utilize his “flexible citizenship” toward achieving political and economic power. Through tapping into private companies and resource in the US that want to invest in hydro-power, Arjun would be asking companies to take a risk on Nepal. In his eyes, it’s a risk he’s willing to take.

Arjun’s goals highlight that there are students whose passion and desire to return are strong, showing evidence of a small reverse brain drain. Of course, among my interviewees, these students with strong desires are also the ones who did not come with their parents, but instead came on their own on a limited student visa. For them, it is easier to fathom a return because it is required. At the same time, these students may also have a fresher sense of Nepal and therefore a more renewed sense of commitment to return as American education fuels their desire to share and expand their passion with others. Rajesh did not hesitate when he said, “I’m definitely going back, either to the education sector or finance sector. My aim is not to have a
better life here [US], but to get an education and maybe get my masters. I’ve been inspired by the liberal arts system of the US and I hope to open up the first liberal arts college in Nepal,” (Kunwar 2014). Rajesh’s inspired dream of return is a prime example of a Nepali immigrant whose personal desire is fueling his personal goals.

In the same vein, Surya did not hesitate as he said with determination, “I know I’m going back. Cause if you see a system that’s failing, it’s up to you to do something about it,” (Sameer Bista 2014). Surya is aware of the pull America has on Nepali youth today as he acknowledged, “This part of the world is a comfort zone. People get too comfortable. But I have no intentions of becoming an American citizen and staying,” (ibid). The drive and passion that is guiding Surya comes from his mother’s sacrifice and his own personal will to see his country improve.

Amita’s love of the US and of her education was so evident in my interview with her. She was so excited talking about the things she has learned and the people she has met, yet when I asked her about returning, I was so surprised to hear her admit, “I looked forward to going to the US for so long. But looking back, I wish I’d stayed. I’ve never been homesick, but I’ve missed out on a lot. I only realized it was a sacrifice after going back and seeing how much family stuff I missed out on,” (Karnali 2014). Amita was quick to add that she is so grateful for the opportunity and ensured me, “The whole process is worth it. And I will take a lot out of it,” yet her regret that she migrated to the US for education is unique among interviewees. I could sense that Amita realized her personal desire to come to the US at a young age was somewhat naïve as she had never considered what she would be leaving behind.

These limited examples of students’ return show patterns of reverse “brain drain”. Reverse “brain drain” has been creating headlines in China, India, and South Korea as migrants are returning to their country of origin. For example, in 2010 out of 100 people that returned to
China, 84 individuals attributed their reason for return to increased opportunity (Manandhar 2010). A majority of returners are therefore drawn mostly by the promise of opportunity, which has not been the case for Nepal. For reverse “brain drain” to occur steadily and make headlines, political stability and economic opportunity must be guaranteed. It is possible that this trickle of returners will create a wave of reverse brain drain migrants, however, that does not seem likely as Nepal’s future hangs in the balance.

While some students are hopeful about their promise of return, they are also those students who have migrated to the US on limited student visas. For those who have lived in the US for a considerable amount of time and will not be forced to leave, the prospect of an uncertain future looms in their minds as one of the main reasons why the thought of return is not always a viable option.

E. An Uncertain Future

“What would I do there if I already established life here?” Sunita’s question echoes the sentiments of many of the students that moved to the US from Nepal at a young age. For many of the students whose age of arrival was ten or younger, although they feel a strong sense of nationalism, they also feel a sense of detachment. Many students do not keep up with Nepali news or politics and instead, learn about Nepal’s current state through their parents or families back in Nepal. When sharing their own political knowledge, many students begin phrases with “I hear its better now…” or “I don’t think it’s like that anymore…” alluding to the fact that their participation in Nepali development and current events is fairly removed.

As most parents of Nepali youth have an immense influence on their children’s lives and decisions because students continue to live at home, much of what is learned and said about Nepal is through parents’ eyes. Ashmi shared, “While my mom has returned a few times to visit
family, my father hasn’t really because he has issues with his brothers and has never returned to his village. I think he’s dissociated that part of himself and he’s happy here. He’s proud of what he’s accomplished for himself here. And we’ve accepted that our family will stay,” (Mool 2014). She went on to explain, “The reason my family came here is because my parents thought Nepal was a bad place for kids to grow up. We haven’t returned because my dad hasn’t seen the change in Nepal,” (ibid). If a parent is unconvinced that Nepal can change, that sense of hopelessness is easily transferred on to their child, as access to information is limited and what is heard is often politicized by the time it reaches students’ computers in the US.

It is worth being noted, that even if political tensions do lessen and conditions begin to improve, those Nepalis in the US today are hesitant to believe what they hear. Ashmi explained to me, “When I talk with my cousins [back in Nepal] they don’t seem much different than me, so maybe it’s better,” (ibid). While Ashmi is hopeful that conditions will improve, she shared that she had never really seriously considered returning to Nepal. She reiterated, “My dad hasn’t seen the changes that are happening,” and admitted, “But I also haven’t seen them since I haven’t returned,” (ibid). Ashmi recognized that all she knows of Nepal is second-hand knowledge and that she may not have a clear image of Nepal that informs her enough to return.

For many students, the thought of helping Nepal and returning is not a possibility. Menaka told me that often, “Many students don’t join NSA because they’re very pessimistic about the situation--they don’t see a point--but I’m more optimistic and joined. Maybe it’s because I didn’t grow up there. I look to Prashant and he’s going to be a successful engineer. He can change Nepal. I’ll do what I can. It’s not black and white. You can be here and still help Nepal if you’re passionate to do it,” (M. Bisht 2014). The pessimism that some students have about the future of Nepal may be disheartening, but there are also many students that are
involved in NSA or student groups such as GlobeMed that celebrate Nepal and work toward helping the country in its development.

Beyond the unsafe and constantly changing political situation, another concern keeping Nepalis in the US from returning is the prospect of an uncertain and insecure future economically. Arjun shared, “My dad doesn’t want to return. He feels like he would have to start over. He wouldn’t have anything to return to. As much as he doesn’t want to stay here, he doesn’t think there’s a way he could go back to work,” (K. Rana 2014). This lack of job opportunity is a huge driving force behind fears of return to Nepal. Prabin also wondered aloud, “In Nepal, I would never be studying medicine. Maybe engineering, but it’s not likely,” (Pokhrel 2014). For Prabin, staying in America means that he can continue to study what he wants because of the opportunities awarded to him.

An uncertain and unstable future is not the vision of return that Nepali immigrant youth of today want to see. In order for students of immigrant families to return, it requires them to take a risk in returning without a known political state, without job opportunity, and with a high educational background. It is important to recognize that there are students that have the desire and will to return to this uncertain future and bring Nepal to a better state.

CHAPTER VI: The Paradox
V. The Paradox

As I consider the advice that these students gave to other potential Nepali youth migrating to America today, it seems that there is a conflict between what is said and what is done or felt (Ahearn 2001). The difference between what is said and what is done is illustrated in the question that Parajuli asked, “How can you help others when you need to help yourself?” The paradox in this situation is that Nepali youth are educated enough to see their dreams and know of economic opportunity in the US and know that Nepal’s future development relies heavily on youth returning to develop their country, yet cannot always fathom their return. To this dynamic, I wonder what is the divide between one’s sense of nationalism and commitment to Nepal? While every student loves talking about being Nepali and embracing that part of their identity, a majority of the students also expressed they do not desire returning or committing themselves to Nepal’s development. Even among those like Amita, Rajesh, and Surya who intend to return, there is a unanimous sentiment among interviewees that the uncertainty of Nepal’s future is a constant fear. At present, the potential for positive political change is hopeful as a new government is in the process of forming, yet the Maoists are currently impeding its success. McGranahan notes that although elections for a new Constituent Assembly were successfully held in November 2013, “The impact of the Maoist-led HLPC has been immediately evident: one of the very first things the new Constituent Assembly did was table a January 2, 2014 Supreme Court Ordinance to the government to create separate commissions for truth and reconciliation, and for the disappeared” (McGranahan 2014: 5). Students know Nepal’s unstable political history and it is hard for them to be entirely confident that the little progress that has been made will go a long way.

As a result of this uncertainty, there is a difference between the advice students give
about returning to Nepal and helping out the country, and what the students actually do. Ahearn explains that in order to interpret this disjuncture, “both text and context must be taken into consideration, and they must be understood to be intrinsically interwoven” (Ahearn 2001: 57).

The discourse around returning is a mismatched set of ideas, conflicting and running together in different forms of speech. Lila Abu-Lughod grapples with Foucault’s idea of discourse looking at, “the distinction between formalized and everyday speech acts” (Abu-Lughod 2000: 186). Building on Foucault, Abu-Lughod makes the distinction between what is said as a formality and what is said in everyday language when talking to a close friend (ibid). In the context of my interviewees, there is a formality to the way some students separated themselves from the advice they gave, telling others to come just for education and then immediately return, conveying an idyllic return. Abu-Lughod explains that this discourse “is a shorthand for a complex of statements made by numerous people in different social contexts justified by the existence of a pattern in the sentiments expressed in the media” (Abu-Lughod 2000: 187). Taking her interpretation of the use of discourse in poems to this context, we can see how Nepali immigrant youth have been conditioned to tell of the hope of return and to convey sentiments that may be unrealistic if applied to their own personal desires. Students know of the challenges that are associated with such thoughts of return and thus, their everyday speech and reaction to my question of their own question of return marks the distinction between their idealized and renewed sense of nationalism and their own personal hesitation to fully commit to returning to Nepal.

There is a culture of need that has become part of the discourse, demanding educated, inspired, and skilled Nepali youth to return to Nepal. Yet the paradox lies in Nepal’s state of underdevelopment. If its conditions improved economically and politically then youth would feel
a stronger desire to return; yet for most students, the uncertainty of returning is what is holding them back.

What does this suggest about the current state of Nepal? And for future Nepalis looking to migrate, study abroad, or work in the US? Based on the perspectives of Nepali youth in America today, the promise of return to Nepal is a constant challenge. The current state of Nepal does not provide much confidence, or at least does not promise quick political or social change for students considering return in the near future. While there are students that have every intention to return, the paradox is still a reality: Nepali youth are aware of their need to return to develop Nepal yet also fear the underdeveloped future ahead should they return.
CHAPTER VII: Conclusions
VI. Conclusions

A. Future of Nepal

As I think back to Parajuli’s words, “youth are the key to Nepal’s future,” that sparked this research, I realize that I have only begun to explore the implications that surface in his comment. When I first began this project, I wanted to find how youth are that key, to understand Nepali youths’ motivations and means of returning to their country of birth and being that change their countrymen and women need. After meeting students actively involved in GlobeMed, I believed that most students were willing and ready to return, with fresh ideas and an innovative perspective after attending schooling in the US. However, the more people I spoke with and the more I observed, I realized that this issue of return is about much more that development and that the decisions and opinions around returning are more complex than I could have imagined. A post-structuralist approach through interviewing many individuals has allowed for multiple perspectives that add to the discourse around commitment to Nepal.

The story of opportunity that had attracted the Nepali students I interviewed to move to the US is a discourse that continues to be fueled today. The US and Nepal continue a semi-colonial relationship through the DV and other visa programs as heavy marketing has made moving to the US for study or permanent migration commonplace and a norm to be desired (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The discourses that are produced within Nepal surrounding “modernity” “progress” and “development” have been imprinted among Nepali people’s minds and for some, a means of opportunity lie in seeking out alternatives abroad (Pigg 1992). The effect that globalization has had on increased immigration patterns has only intensified as Nepal’s political situation has continued to be rocky.

As the numbers of Nepali youth increase in the USA, students are producing their own
imagined communities (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), multi-layered identities (Ong 1999), and cultural knowledge (Foucault 1982). Many students have enjoyed years in the US, growing up with family support and pressure while others have chosen to study abroad in the US on their own in search of an American education. While education continues to drive many students’ reasons for migration- whether it be their parents’ desires or their own- Nepali youth are also brought up in a ‘culture of need’ that is produced throughout national discourse. Need for young and inspired bodies, however, is not as easy as Nepali people might hope. As an effect of the ‘culture of need’ discourse that is produced, Nepali youth that move to the USA find their own ways of interpreting that discourse and create new ideas of if or how they can fill that need (Geertz 1973). As a result of students’ interpretation of their own culture, the need for youth to return to Nepal to serve as the key to the country’s future development is a challenge that students are facing today. This discourse and conflict is one way that Nepali subjects are governed and controlled by the state (Foucault 1982). Yet the ways in which Nepali students in the US today choose to conceive of their place and negotiate those spaces of control through their own production of knowledge allows for agency and power for them to choose their own future and commitment to Nepal (Ahearn 2001).

There are students whose initial plans are to study abroad in the US for education, earn their degree, and return. Yet not everyone is returning. There are also students who have been raised mostly in the US and who feel little attachment or commitment to Nepal. Most of the reason behind students’ lack of desire to return to Nepal does not have to do with a loss of love or patriotism; on the contrary, hesitation lies in the country’s uncertain future as political instability and job insecurity worries and frustrates individuals, discouraging them from return. In this regard, the discourses of “modernity”, “development”, and “progress” that fueled many to
leave Nepal in the first place are the same reasons for a lack of will to return. Should Nepal experience positive political change, things may look different and more Nepalis in the US may seriously consider return. Acknowledging the difference between what is said and what is done is critical in understanding the highly conflicted discourse of return. Practice-theory (Ahearn 2001) has demonstrated how it is that Nepali students can advise others to return and change Nepal, yet conceptualize their own commitment to return as separate and possibly exempt from that push.

It is important to note that there are students who are returning. Many have ideas about ways to improve Nepal and ways to use their American education to fuel their desire to share and develop their country. Finally, some students are choosing to stay in the USA, yet have innovative ideas to change Nepal from abroad through utilizing resources in America.

While Nepali immigrant youth in America face futures that could remain in the US, return to Nepal, or live somewhere in between, what is essential about this project is understanding that youth in the US today have diverse perspectives and unique stories. This project attempts to highlight the desires, dreams, and sentiments of Nepali immigrant youth of today and bring to light that there are exceptions to every rule. While return to Nepal may seem unlikely, there are numerous students whose personal dreams and future plans show that promising and intelligent Nepalis want to return. Likewise, this research also conveys the point that students are becoming more innovative and finding ways to continue to live in the US while still helping Nepal.

**B. Future Steps**

I recognize the limitations this study has in its breadth of the Nepali immigrant youth studying in America today. Future research should consider focusing on the population of
Nepalis that have returned. Understanding their perspectives can give us their reasons for return, commentary on their transition back to Nepal, and what future steps, if any, they have toward developing the country. Another source of future research that has been done on the surface level but I think should be applied to youth specifically and focused on gaining perspectives is through interviewing the youth that are leaving Nepal that are not going to America, the UK, or Australia for education. This research should look at those youth migrating for work opportunities in the Middle East and elsewhere where many youth are suffering tremendous hardship from labor.

Additionally, it may be relevant to do a study specifically teasing out the migration of particular caste and ethnic groups. All of the interviewees were from Brahmin and Chhetri caste or Newari ethnic group, yet the mountain and hill folk from Sherpa, Gurung, Loba, etc. ethnic groups are also heavily represented in the US. Getting the perspectives of other ethnic groups could potentially diversify results or may likely be consistent with my interviewees’ experiences. Lastly, I propose studying those Nepali youth in the same age group as my interviewees who are migrating to the USA for employment reasons rather than educational ones.

These future outlets of research could expand the research on Nepali immigrant youth of today, to round out the population and understand each group’s motivations for exodus, hope for return, and personal identity. Understanding these issues can bring to light the perspectives and voices of those that have been given the key to Nepal’s development, and I feel that it is only necessary that their stories and opinions be heard.
List of Interviewees

Bisht, Anita. Personal Interview. 3 February 2014.
Bisht, Menaka. Personal Interview. 27 February 2014.
Bista, Sameer. Personal Interview. 11 February 2014.
Dhakal, Mahdav. Personal Interview. 25 February 2014.
Hamal, Sunita. Personal Interview. 5 March 2014.
Lohani, Roshni. Personal Interview. 28 February 2014.
Joshi, Aadi. Personal Interview. 6 February 2014.
Joshi, Prashant. Personal Interview. 26 February 2014.
Karnali, Amita. Personal Interview. 23 February 2014.
Kunwar, Rajesh. Personal Interview. 20 February 2014.
Malla, Santosh. Personal Interview. 7 February 2014.
Mishra, Suman. Personal Interview. 5 March 2014.
Rana, Arjun. Personal Interview. 28 February 2014.
Bibliography


http://www.nepalembassy.in/nepuniversities.htm


Liberman, Kenneth. "Asian Student Perspectives on American University Instruction."


<http://old.himalmag.com/component/content/article/1659-negotiating-peace.html>


UNESCO. “Global Education Digest: Comparing Education Statistics Around the World.”


