



## Timo Kivimäki – Interim Director at NIAS

As many of you will have heard, Per Ronnäs, NIAS's director, is leaving us for the post of chief economist at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

Until a new director takes over at NIAS – as expected in the near future – Timo Kivimäki has been appointed interim director.

While we regret Per's departure from NIAS, we wish him all the best in his new challenges.



*Photo: Per Ronnäs*

### Theme: Migration

Few aspects of globalization entail such drama and evoke such strong and mixed emotions as migration. The migration of labour across borders in search of better livelihoods is nothing new in Asia. Contemporary cultures and ethnic compositions bear witness of the pervasive and lasting influence of movements in the past. Yet, recent decades have seen a surge in labour migration to levels suggesting the emergence of regional labour markets as the borders of national labour markets are being blurred.

The present issue of *NIASnytt* has labour migration in Asia as the core theme. The various articles emanate primarily from research presented and discussed at an International Workshop on Labour Migration in Southeast and East Asia, held in Lund, Sweden, earlier this year (see the report on page 24).

**NIAS Scholarships: p. 14**

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# Transnational Community Activities for Local Survival: A Nepalese Visa-Overstayer Community in Japan

by Keiko Yamanaka

*Massive global migration has given rise to vibrant and diverse transnational activities worldwide, which Portes (1999: 464) has defined as*

*those that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants. Such activities may be conducted by relatively powerful actors, such as representatives of national governments and multinational corporations or may be initiated by more modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations. These activities are not limited to economic enterprises, but include political, cultural and religious initiatives as well.*

## Transnational Community Activities

Adopting this definition, I refer to 'transnational community activities' as cultural, social and political activities by non-elite individuals that take place across borders on a regular basis for common collective goals. By 'non-elite individuals', I mean those migrants and non-migrants whose interests are grounded in their families and communities, rather than in the state, corporations or markets.

## Nepalese in Central Japan

In this article, I will present examples of such transnational community activities drawn from my study on a small community of about 500 Nepalese visa-overstayers in central Japan. I began this research in the spring of 1994, when I lived for six months in Kathmandu. Since then, up to the autumn of 2000, I periodically conducted interviews with migrants in Japan and those who had returned to Nepal. Results from this research have been reported in several academic and non-academic publications (e.g., Yamanaka, 1999, 2000, 2001). There I discussed migrants' ethnic histories, demographic profiles, information networks, employment and wages in the context of Japan's immigration

policies and chronic labour shortages. Here I will discuss Nepalese migrants' community activities and organizations in Japan based on participatory observation from 1998 to 2000. These migrants (immigrants) work in small factories and construction sites in Hamamatsu, a city with a population of half a million in Shizuoka Prefecture, and in cities such as Toyohashi, Toyokawa and Toyota, in neighbouring Aichi Prefecture. The majority of them are working-age males from Tibeto-Burman language speaking groups in Nepal's western and eastern middle hills, such as Magars and Gurungs from western Nepal, and Limbus and Rais from eastern Nepal. In recent years, women – wives of male immigrants – have joined the community in increasing numbers.

## Sunday Get-Togethers

Shortly after I began my research in Hamamatsu, I became familiar with these immigrants' lively and well-organized community activities. For example, 30 to 50 Nepalese men (and a few women) gathered on Sunday afternoons – their only day off from their hard and often dangerous work in factories and construction sites – in a small park under the Central Bus Station. There they chatted

with one another in their own languages, exchanging information about friends, jobs and news from home. These occasions also afforded them the opportunity to entrust part of their earnings to a designated agent, who would deposit it in a bank, to be forwarded as remittances to their families in Nepal.

This kind of meeting is not unusual among foreign workers of any nationality, for their social and cultural needs are great in their unfamiliar environments. Often as in Hamamatsu, they have a regular time and place to meet in order that they will not have to make individual arrangements to get together. A well-known example, from a very different part of the world, is that of live-in Filipina housemaids in Hong Kong who congregate every Saturday and Sunday in public spaces (see Constable, 1997). In January 1998, on a Sunday afternoon in Hong Kong, I unexpectedly witnessed tens of thousands of Filipinas celebrating their day off. In parks, on sidewalks and between buildings of the Star Ferry terminal, clusters of these women occupied every possible space, sitting on blankets or plastic sheets to spend hours picnicking, chatting with friends and exchanging letters



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A survey meeting with a group of Nepalese migrant workers, 1995 (Photo: Gerald Berreman)

and photos from home. It was a scene that was astonishing to me because of the huge number of women congregated there and the lively interaction among them. As the evening approached, they suddenly disappeared, en route to their tiny rooms in their employers' households.

### Nepalese Community Activities

Nepalese in Tokai met for many other activities in addition to their Sunday afternoon gatherings. Despite the scarcity of free time, they had established a wide variety of organizations and community activities, both those that appeal to all Nepalis and those specific to particular ethnic communities. They sponsor Buddhist and Hindu ceremonies, organize cultural and sports events, publish newsletters and magazines, collect donations for ailing and injured compatriots, contribute to Nepalese charities, collaborate with Japanese voluntary groups to arrange medical treatment for the sick and to negotiate labour issues with employers. I shall describe examples of such activities and organizations in which I have participated.

### • Annual Programme of the Nepalese Welfare Society Japan (Toyohashi, February 1998)

The Nepalese Welfare Society of Japan (NWSJ), established in 1995, sponsored a programme in a public hall to celebrate its third anniversary. Migrant men and women of the Himalayan Club performed Nepalese music and dance. An estimated 400 Nepalese attended together with several Japanese citizens who had volunteered their assistance to the community.

### • Opening Ceremony of a Nepali store (Toyota, September 1998)

The opening of a new store stocking Nepalese and other Asian foods, videos, tapes, magazines, etc., and owned by a Nepalese legal resident, was celebrated. A Japanese Buddhist priest conducted a *puja* (ritual) in front of the decorated store, while some 200 Nepalese watched from the parking lot and the street. A popular Nepalese actress, who happened to be visiting Japan, gave a short speech.

### • Dashain Festival Party (Toyohashi, October 1998)

The NWSJ rented a large hall in which to celebrate the Nepalese festival of *Dashain*. The event

featured Nepalese music followed by a catered Japanese buffet. At least 200 Nepalese were in attendance, including a former cabinet member of the Nepalese government. A local Japanese labour union leader was an honored guest.

### • Wedding Reception (Hamamatsu, February 1999)

A Nepalese couple who recently married in Japan, held a Sunday afternoon reception in an Indian restaurant. About 100 Nepalese and ten Japanese friends and employers celebrated with abundant Indian food and beer.

### • Summer Bowling Championship (Toyokawa, July 1999)

*Tamu Dhii* Nagoya, a branch of the Gurung Association-Japan, sponsored a bowling tournament. They had reserved half of a large Japanese bowling hall for the event in which sixteen teams, some wearing team T-shirts, competed with trophies for the winning team and 'the most valuable player'. Participants and spectators numbered about 100, most of whom then moved to a nearby Indian restaurant to celebrate with South Asian snacks and beer.

### • Charity Show (Hamamatsu, June 2000)

In order to collect money for charitable activities in Nepal, the Everest Club organized a cultural show held in a public hall. Six artists were brought from Nepal to provide a programme of Nepalese music and dance. An estimated 300 Nepalese attended.

In addition to these activities, a number of sub-groups within the Nepalese community in Tokai published magazines, either on their own or in cooperation with Nepalese organizations elsewhere in Japan. Most of the articles were written by migrants in the Nepali

language. These were edited in Japan and sent to Nepal to be printed before being returned to Japan for distribution. The magazines included: *Himali Sandeshi* by NWSJ; *Koseli* by the Himalayan Club; *Tamu Dhii* by the *Tamu Dhii* (Gurung Association); *Peace* by the Tamang Association.

### Motivations for Community Activities

These were only a few of the major events that took place during my visits in Hamamatsu and/or other cities. On other Sundays I participated in a wide variety of activities by various groups in many locations. During one day in December 1999, for example, I observed as a group of Nepalese musicians – vocalists, guitarists and a drummer – practised new songs in a rented music studio in Toyohashi. After a short visit with this group, I moved to a conference room in a nearby public hall to attend a regular meeting of the Magar Association. The meeting drew about twenty members. After this meeting, I got together with two Magar friends in a coffee shop to ask about their activities. They told me how important it was for them to organize their community activities on Sundays, how happy they were to get together with friends, and how significant it was for them to preserve Nepalese identity and culture away from home.

On another occasion, during the Summer Bowling Championship held by the Gurung Association's Nagoya Branch, Chitra Gurung, a construction worker and the main organizer of this and other events, explained to me his commitments and motivations for community activities:

After work, I am tired but have to do this and that – writing, copying, calling ... lots of things. They take time. Sundays, almost every Sunday, I have to go to

committee meetings. The Gurung Association does not pay for transportation, but I have to go to Toyohashi, Nagoya, Hamamatsu, and sometimes Yokohama and Tokyo ... lots of money. But I am collecting experience and knowledge in Japan. I meet many important Nepalese and Japanese such as the Nepalese Ambassador to Japan, Japanese NGO workers and others. I also learn the Japanese language. I am helping the Association and get more things than money. These people get to know me and they will help me when I need their help. I am not wasting my time here.

### Immigration Policies and Contradictions

I was very impressed that these Nepalese migrants carried out, on their own volition in their scarce free time, such a variety of projects for their collective goals, especially in view of the fact that they are undocumented (illegal) workers in a nation which denies them all rights. Immigration authorities and the police are required to enforce immigration policies that make it a criminal offence to hire undocumented workers. In fact, each year the authorities arrest and deport a number of Nepalese and other foreign nationals. They are subject to high levels of prejudice, discrimination and exploitation by employers and the public. Undocumented workers are paid lower wages than others for the same jobs. The media report crimes committed by foreigners while overlooking similar crimes by Japanese, a policy which reinforces public suspicion of them. In short, Japan is a very inhospitable society for foreign workers, and especially so for those who are undocumented.

Nevertheless, my observations of the experience of these Nepalese migrants suggest that there are islands of tolerance and acceptance which afford these visa-overstayers refuge

from the sea of suspicion and hostility which surrounds them. Among these observations are the following:

- (1) Members of the Nepalese community have welcomed me, a Japanese woman, to study their migration experiences and invited me to participate in many of their activities.
- (2) They frequently hold community activities in highly visible public and commercial spaces where Japanese people are present and sometimes participate.
- (3) Official visitors – politicians, diplomats, performers and artists – from Nepal often participate in these events or send congratulatory messages.
- (4) A small but active number of Japanese sympathize with the plight of undocumented Nepalese and other foreign workers, and meet together with them in efforts to counteract the mistreatment they suffer in society at large.

### Possible Explanations

One may ask: what explains the lively and public community activities of undocumented Nepalese in Japan?

The answer to this question has two parts. One part lies in the characteristics of the Nepalese immigrant population in Japan: their education, age and ethnic backgrounds; the Nepalese history of foreign military service as the Gurkha soldiers in the Indian and British Armies; their tradition of mutual help organizations (e.g., rotating credit associations); and the recent rise of ethnic activism in post-democracy Nepal.

The second part of the answer concerns the nature and consequences of Japan's immigration policies: the contradiction between governmental policies and labour shortages faced by employers; the social and economic isolation of foreign workers; the lack of human rights consciousness on the part of the Japanese govern-

ment and public, which forces undocumented workers to rely upon their own collective resources.

Each of these topics – characteristics of the migrant population and the impact of Japanese immigration policies – requires further research. Instead of elaborating each component of these topics, I discuss below theoretical implications of Nepalese transnational community activities for emerging transnational migration studies.

### Transnationalism from Below

The recent flurry of literature on 'transnationalism from below' emphasizes the importance of agency generated among immigrant populations through transnational activities (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Portes, 1999). Up to the 1970s, elite groups with national and corporate interests had monopolized international space and cross-border activities. With the advent of the age of global migration, non-elites or ordinary people comprise the majority of migration flows, engaging in various kinds of trans-border activities, both economic and non-economic. According to Portes and others,

transnationalism among immigrants of humble origin commonly develops in reaction to their oppressive life circumstances at their destination. As groups of marginalized class and ethnicity, immigrants routinely encounter market exploitation and everyday racism. Trans-national activities, be they cultural, entrepreneurial or political, provide immigrants with a means of overcoming such adverse forces, because they allow the immigrants to draw upon resources and ideas grounded in everyday practices and social relationships in their native land. By linking their interests and activities with those of their counterparts at origin, immigrants are able to confirm their cultural identities while demanding equal rights and social justice. Such grass-roots transnationalism produces bottom-up, counter-hegemonic power designed to resist large global and institutional inequality to which immigrants and their families are permanently subjected.

### Global Civil Society Movement

An interesting but expectable development since the 1980s is that immigrants' transnational activities have intersected with

the rapidly growing global civil society movement throughout the world. Concerned citizens are alerted to common problems of environment, human rights, health (particularly HIV/AIDS), labour migration, war, refugee populations, poverty and inequality. 'Global civil society' refers to those voluntary organizations that comprise society outside of the nation state and global markets, and are aimed at enhancing citizens' participation in democratic governance (CIVICUS, 1994). These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizens' groups and networks, educational and religious institutions, community organizations and labour unions. In a world where global markets expand without regulation by nation states, global civil society plays a major role in counter-acting, or at least keeping the balance between, forces of the state and commercial institutions. Such phenomena have recently drawn academic interest as political forms of transnationalism from below, wherein coalitions of citizens of various nationalities and classes, including immigrants, exercise power transcending national boundaries. By the 1990s numerous NGOs in all parts of the world, frequently in collaboration with immigrant organizations, addressed migrant rights issues challenging market dominance and governmental oppression.

### Grassroots Coalitions in Japan

Transnational community activities of Nepalese immigrants in Japan with the committed support of a few Japanese NGOs, are examples of the growing global civil society movement (Gurowitz, 1999). A unique feature of this international coalition at the grass-roots is that the Nepalese are undocumented workers whose ability to organize community



Folk music and dance, performed by an all-male group, Annual Programme of Nepalese Welfare Society Japan. Toyohashi, 1998. (Photo: Keiko Yamanaka)



Summer Bowling Championship (Toyokawa 1999): a small group of the Tibetan Team waves their flag. (Photo: Keiko Yamanaka)

activities and defend their equal rights on their own is extremely limited. Similarly, without Japanese NGOs' and individual citizens' cooperation and assistance, it is unlikely that the Nepalese would be able to arrange to hold an event in a public space or negotiate with abusive employers for unpaid wages. Business establishments frequently exclude, or discriminate against foreign customers, demanding official documents or proofs of Japanese citizens' guarantee in exchange for providing service. The Nepalese are well aware of these legal and social constraints on their residence, employment and freedom in Japan. To reduce institutional and cultural barriers, undocumented immigrants make special efforts to cultivate rapport with Japanese NGOs and citizens sympathetic to their plight and causes, in order to mitigate their social and economic marginalization. They invite these Japanese to their community events as honored guests, requesting public speeches and thanking them with gifts and awards.

For Japanese NGOs and concerned citizens, undocumented immigrants embody the ultimate in labour exploitation and grave human rights violation based on

nationality, ethnicity and legal status. They blame these problems on the globalized labour market system operating under now defunct nation-state frameworks. Labour unionists fear that employment of foreign workers will undermine Japanese labour standards for which they and their predecessors have long fought. Medical professionals are concerned that general health conditions may deteriorate if immigrants do not receive medical checks and treatment equal to the Japanese. Religious workers are interested in reaching those foreigners who share their beliefs and rituals. Human rights activists are motivated to eliminate open hostility and discrimination against immigrants based on their collective identities, particularly in the case of the undocumented. Specific causes may vary, but at the dawn of becoming a multicultural society, Japanese civil society is energized to seize the opportunity to act on their agenda and interests. In the view of these citizens, undocumented foreigners are victims of the contradictory systems that produce and reproduce sufferings among immigrants from the Third World. They believe it to be the

negligence of the state that allows such injustice to go unattended despite the fact that corporations continue to demand inexpensive labour for their profit making.

### Immigrants' Agency and Governance

The combination of undocumented migration and growing civil society in Japan has spawned a force alternative to global governance, in which immigrants and citizens both play a major role in defending migrants' rights and human rights, thus enhancing their agency in today's increasingly interactive world. By initiating community actions that transcend borders and cultures, the undocumented Nepalese seek to increase their ability to control their life environment – an environment that is predominantly defined by their illegal status and consequently weak market position. Rather than forfeiting their right to self-determination, the Nepalese have chosen to exercise their agency and creativity by mobilizing their collective resources on Sundays to generate empowering community actions. In so doing, they reconstruct the everyday life of ordinary Nepalese citizens in which they would have

participated if they remained in Nepal. Such activities include holiday celebrations, cultural performances, community association meetings, wedding receptions and sports. By creating and participating in these events in Japan, Nepalese immigrants confirm with one another their Nepalese identity and migrant solidarity, while demonstrating their good citizenship to Japanese NGOs and the public. In so doing, they are simultaneously sending a message to their homeland that, despite their long absence, they still belong to its people and soil.

Transnational community activities by undocumented Nepalese in Japan thus exemplify agency, resistance and the will of self-governance among one of the most vulnerable populations in the world today.

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## REPORT: A Workshop on Labour Migration and Socio-Economic Change in Southeast and East Asia, Lund

Free and rapidly increasing international flows of goods, capital and information are heralded as hallmarks of globalization. Movement of people and labour across national, cultural and ethnic borders are often left out of the equation. Yet, it is arguably the most complex and controversial of the flows, as well as the one with the most far-reaching consequences for both the sending

and receiving societies and also for the individuals concerned.

At an abstract macro level, labour migration displays similarities with flows of capital from one area to another. Just like capital movements, labour migration is triggered by spatial differences in earning opportunities. Large and increasing differences in wages and employment opportunities provide the basis for labour migration. Improved levels of education and language skills, together with rapidly increasing access to information, serve to increase the responsiveness of labour to overseas employment and income opportunities.

However, while the core cause of labour migration is economic, the implications and consequences are much more diverse and far-reaching. It

changes the demographic and skill composition in both the sending and receiving countries and, more often than not, also the ethnic composition of the population in the latter. Thus, it has not only economic, but also social, cultural and sometimes political implications. For the individual, migration is typically a both costly and risky undertaking, not least in the many cases where migration takes place in defiance of legal entry barriers in the receiving countries.

Thus, the multifarious implications make labour migration a highly complex topic for research, requiring the use of a broad gamut of approaches and disciplines in order to be fully understood.

Globalization and increased regional integration, combined with very large cross-country



Relaxing excursion to the Southern coast of Sweden (Photo: Per Ronnäs)