CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora: the concept

The term ‘Diaspora’ is today used in transnational and migration studies to describe any settlement of people scattered in different foreign lands outside their original homeland. Diaspora in its original meaning refers to the settlement of Jews in different parts of the world outside Israel. The etymology of the term is Greek, deriving from *dia* meaning ‘through’ and *sperio* meaning ‘to scatter’. The literal meaning of the term is ‘a scattering or dispersion’.2

Robin Cohen3 argues that in the Jewish tradition of diaspora, what he calls ‘victim tradition’; emphasis has been on the nature of ‘their catastrophic origins and uncomfortable outcomes’. This negative connotation of the term diaspora, according to Cohen, has undergone change and had acquired positive connotation to it. While accepting that the victim tradition is central to any definition of the concept, Cohen argues that such a definition needs to ‘transcend’ the victim tradition.4

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2 Ibid; also see Robin Cohen, ‘Diasporas and the nation-state: from victims to challengers’, *International Affairs*, Vol.72, no. 3, 1996, p. 507. According to Cohen, the original meaning of the term ‘Diaspora’ is ‘to sow widely’ mentioned in the Greek translation of the Bible.
3 Ibid. According to Cohen, ‘expansion through plunder, military conquest, colonization and migration were the predominant features of the Greek diaspora’, which he calls ‘a diaspora of active colonization’.
4 Ibid. The reasons Cohen gave for transcending the victim traditions are 1) The experiences of victim diaspora are both ‘enriching and creative’ and ‘enervating and fearful’ and 2) The use of the expression applies to wide categories of people, pp. 513-14.
According to William Safran, the term diaspora is used as 'a metaphoric designation' to describe several categories of people such as expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities.

From both Cohen and Safran's ideas of diaspora, it is clear that the concept has transcended from its original definition of the Jewish experiences. As Steven Vertovec notes that diaspora is used to describe any population who are considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' meaning whose cultural origin are believed to be from a land outside their settlement and whose social, economic and political 'networks cross' beyond national boundaries. Vertovec has further identified three meanings of the concept of diaspora. They are (1) diaspora as social form, (2) diaspora as type of consciousness and (3) diaspora as a mode of cultural production.

The above discussion on the concept of diaspora suggests that there is no one meaning and clear-cut definition. The concept is yet to have a consensus among scholars. However, our purpose here is not to debate on the concept of diaspora. But the present study would employ the term 'diaspora' in its broadest sense. The various 'categories of people' identified by Safran, in many aspects, defines the communities under study, as they were, and still are, seen in their own country as 'alien residents', 'immigrants' from India and '(Indian) ethnic and racial

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5 Cited in Cohen, ibid., p.514.
7 For a discussion on the three meanings of the concept see ibid., pp.142-56.
8 For a detail discussion on the concept of diasporas see Robin Cohen, Global diasporas: An introduction (Oxon: Routledge, 2001).
groups'. In this sense, the term 'diaspora' can be used independently without prefixing the term 'Indian' or any other word to define or describe them. Also, the communities under study can be considered as 'transnational' communities as used by Vertovec. However, Vertovec's definition of their 'cultural origin' may not hold true in some of the cases such as the Maithilis, Tharus and Awadhis because they believe their cultural origin is not from outside their present settlement, but is rooted in the land of their present settlement. Some of them challenge the concept of diaspora by arguing that their original homeland has been only divided between two countries only in the modern times. They also believe that they had a long history of connection to the land. Here, the question of representation and politics of culture may be relevant. As their culture is more prominently represented in another neighbouring country, while it is marginally represented in their own country, their culture is seen as an 'alien' culture. The other aspects of the definition of diaspora by Vertovec that concerns with social, economic and political 'networks' beyond national boundaries is applicable. But these networks are more important because of the proximity of the land, both geographically and historically, rather than the origin from another place theory. The present study shall employ the diaspora concept as discussed above to refer to the communities under study. With the above discussion, as they are referred to as 'Indians', the question now is, what is 'Indian diaspora' and who constitute this group?
The Concept of Indian Diaspora

The term 'Indian Diaspora' is yet to establish as a well-defined concept. However, academicians, government officials and writers often deploy the term to describe those people whose cultural origin or ancestral homeland is said to be from India. As the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora\(^9\) notes, Indian Diaspora is a 'generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India'. Indian Diaspora is composed of 'Non-Residents Indians' (NRIs) and 'Person of Indian Origin' (PIOs) and refers also to their descendants. This leads us to the question of who are PIOs and NRIs.

The expression Person of Indian Origin or PIOs refer to those people, including their descendents, who had migrated from India and had acquired the citizenship of their 'host' country. As per the Person of Indian Origin Card (PIO Card) issued by the Government of India on 31\(^{st}\) March 1999, a Person of Indian Origin or PIO is a 'foreign citizen' not being a citizen of Pakistan and Bangladesh\(^10\), if:

\(^9\) The Government of India constituted the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora in September 2000 under the Chairmanship of Dr. L. M. Singhvi to prepare a report on 'Indian Diaspora'. The Committee submitted its report on 8 January 2002 to the Prime Minister. For a detail discussion on the report see Chapter 5.

\(^10\) The definition of PIO categorically excludes people from Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, no reason for their exclusion is given. One may ask why these two countries are specifically mentioned? What about countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma) that were also under British India? One may even ask why countries like Maldives, Bhutan, and Nepal were not been mentioned. If one considers the PIO definition in political and legal terms, any person who migrated from India to Pakistan or Bangladesh and had acquired their citizenship, he/she is a citizen of another country and legally, a citizen of a country other than India can be a PIO under the PIO definition. Hence, the insertion of two specific countries contradicts with its own definition of PIO. One can also consider the PIO definition in cultural and social terms. If the people of Pakistan and Bangladesh are excluded because these countries emerged as Muslim countries, what about the Hindus in Bangladesh or Pakistan who are not Indians citizens. And why countries that were part of British India were not mentioned. The question is therefore, how does India claim some
i. he/she at any time held an Indian Passport; or

ii. he/she or either of his/her parents or grandparents or great grandparents was born in and permanently resident in India as defined by the Government of India Act, 1935 and other territories that became part of India thereafter provided neither was at any time citizen of any of the aforesaid countries (Pakistan and Bangladesh); or

iii. he/she is a spouse of a citizen of India or a person of Indian origins defined (above).  

The NRIs are Indian citizens who reside in foreign countries for an indefinite period. According to the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) of 1973 as amended by the Foreign Exchange Regulation Amendment Act of 1993, NRIs are Indian citizens residing outside India.  

NRI and PIO are different. The distinction between the NRIs and PIOs is on the legal status of these people. The NRIs are citizens of India as they hold Indian passport whereas the PIOs are citizens of a country other than India. Their only tie with India is cultural and not political.  

The above definition of Indian Diaspora implies three aspects: (1) a migrated population; (2) a territorial limit; (3) and a composition of people. Although these aspects are central of any definition of the concept, their specificities can be subject to arguments and debates. As regards to the first aspect, no specific reference is made for the period of migration. This would include early

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Nepalese and Sri Lankans as people of Indian origin? The Government of India is yet to define PIO taking into account these factors.

11 Under the PIO Card several facilities were extended to the 'person of Indian origin'. See Ministry of Home Affairs Notifications about Person of Indian Origin Card Scheme, [Online: web] Accessed 15 February 2004 URL: http://meadev.nic.in/info/pio/pio.htm


ancient migrations. However, this is debatable as Sahadevan argues that, ‘during the time of ancient Indian migration, the concept of India had not existed... (t)herefore, on account of the absence of more perspective link between the categories of India and Indians, it stands to reason that the ancient Indian emigrants cannot be treated as PIO.\footnote{P. Sahadevan, ‘Problems of the People of Indian Origin in South Asia: The Case of ‘Burmese Indians’ and ‘Indian Tamils’ of Sri Lanka’, in S.D. Muni, ed., Understanding South Asia (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1994), p. 46.}

The origin of the term India has ‘long and complex histories’. According to some scholars, the Sanskrit word \textit{Sindhu}, meaning ‘the sea’ and designating a river (Indus), is the origin of the term.\footnote{Ian J. Barrow, ‘From Hindustan to India: Naming Change in Changing Names’, \textit{Journal of South Asian Studies}, vol. XXVI, no. 1, 2003, p. 37.} Ian Barrow argues that the use of the term India over Hindustan in British cartographic works became popular only by the end of nineteenth century.\footnote{Ibid., p. 39.} This suggests that the concept of India as is understood today to describe the land have come to exist only by the turn of the twentieth century. The idea of being ‘Indian’ also is of recent origin.

As Sunil Khilnani points out:

\begin{quote}
...before the nineteenth century, no residents of the subcontinent would have identified themselves as Indian. There existed intricate, ramified vocabularies of common understanding, which classified people by communities of lineage. Subcontinental society was hardly static, yet most people never ventured beyond their own or neighbouring localities. They knew little about each other and were uninterested in learning more, preferring to remain distant strangers in a land peopled in their imagination by marvelous and absurd ‘other’.
\end{quote}

From both Barrow and Khilnani's views, one can firmly argue that migration of people before the nineteenth century cannot be treated as PIOs because the idea of being 'Indian' had come to being only after that period.

The second aspect pertains to *territorial boundaries*. In contemporary times, India having demarcated borders provides a territorial identity. Hence, a person moving out from the Indian territory could be said to be an Indian immigrant. However, like the first aspect, it also becomes problematic when the question of ancient period is raised.

The third aspect of the definition pertains to the *composition* of Indian diaspora, namely, 'Non-Resident Indians' (NRIs) and 'People of Indian origin' (PIOs) including their descendents. NRIs and PIOs are mainly defined in political terms, particularly, on their national status. This fails to include the stateless people of 'Indian origin'.

Then, what is Indian diaspora? And what makes it Indian? On the question of the use of Indian diaspora to describe the settlement of 'Indian communities' abroad, Vinay Lal argues that it is 'perfectly reasonable because the conditions that make for a diasporic community are admittedly complex' and more so because of the complexities surrounding the issue of 'origin'. Still the question remains as to what makes the community Indian? The answer, probably, lies in the cultural and ancestral linkages of the Indian diasporic community with India. The linkages are

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seen through socio-religious ties such as 'dress', 'social practices', 'family nexus', 'Indian arranged marriage', 'Indian food', 'Indian cinema', etc.19

However, Baladas Ghoshal points out that the Indian diaspora is not a 'monolithic'.20 Ghoshal identifies three characteristics of the Indian diaspora. First, there is great diversity among the Indian diaspora based on language, religion, geographical regions from where they emigrated, and under different types and processes through which they migrated. He describes them as 'a microcosm of Indian society'. Secondly, despite the diversities, they 'all have the unifying identity of Indian diversity'. They possess a feeling of 'oneness' and 'being apart of greater Indian society', which is reinforced by the natives in the countries of their adoption, who treats them as 'ethnic Indian'. Thirdly, the economic advancement of the Indian diaspora anywhere puts them in a 'single category'.21 It may be argued that these characteristics do not hold in all the cases, particularly, the third characteristic relating to 'economic advancement' as there exists some economically unprivileged group among the Indian diaspora. Having said that, it cannot be denied that massive advancement has been made among businessmen and professionals.

19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
As complex as it is, to sum up, one may say that Indian diaspora is ‘distinctive in its diversity’. And as Judith M. Brown neatly puts it, ‘Being “Indian” is now an international cultural identity’.

**Indian Diaspora in South Asia**

South Asia, also referred as the Indian sub-continent during the colonial period, presents a complex and ‘intertwined historical processes’ – politically, culturally and economically. The region has been a receiver of large-scale migration from different directions at different periods of time. Movements of people both within and outside the region is traced back to time immemorial and continues to do so. Infact, the diversity of ethnic and culture was largely a product of migration into the region. According to an estimate ‘approximately 35 to 40 million people have moved across national boundaries in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal since 1947, some as economic migrants, more as refugees.

It was not until the end of the colonial rule that the question of migrants, assumed political significance. The British colonial empire brought the institution of ‘state’ in which citizenship became the most important political identity. Myron Weiner observes that ‘(w)hat is most troubling to governments in (S)outh Asia is the unwanted ethnic mix that migration brings into communities anxiously seeking

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to assert their own identity'. The question of 'insider' and 'outsider' or 'we' and 'other' got political meaning. Furthermore, the rise of nationalism against the colonial rule paved the way for 'sons of the soil' ideology. On the question of the rise of 'nationalism', Imtiaz Ahmed points out that:

In South Asia, 'nation', 'nationalism', and 'nationhood' are all products of colonial history. There is no evidence of such concepts or ideas having any relevance to South Asia's history prior to the arrival of the Europeans... Nationalism in South Asia soon became one of the major tactics for organizing the majority of the people for reproducing state power. But paradoxically, due to its alien-ness and the mechanical way it was applied, it also became a source of tension and unrest for pluralist South Asia.

Ashis Nandy has commented on identity of a person in South Asia that 'every person has more than one identity'. In the post-colonial period of 'nation-states' in South Asia, followed by active construction of 'national identity', the question of migrants reached serious proportions, creating political and social tensions between 'emigrants' and 'natives' that also resulted in bilateral hiccups.

As Urmila Phadnis rightly observes that:

...for long time, given the ethnic plurality of South Asia, post-colonial nation-building approaches focused almost exclusively in creating a unified 'national identity' based around either common political values and citizenship or a putative majoritarian 'ethnic'

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25 Ibid.


27 He writes, 'I have gradually come to suspect that every person in South Asia has more than one identity. There is perhaps no other part in the world where people live with such immense variety – with about 2000 languages, 20,000 castes and subcastes, more than 250 tribes, and scores of regional, ecological and other cultural differences. Sometimes, many of these differences are to be found within a person.' See Ashis Nandy, 'Nation, State and Self-Hatred', *Himal South Asia*, July 1996, p. 17.

28 Ibid. Nandy argues that South Asian countries have imported the idea of nation state and wanted to build nation states the way the colonial rulers ruled South Asia. This has played an important role in creating a 'self-inflicted blindness, for the nation state fears diversity'.
identity. The overall aim of both approaches has been to produce a pulverized and uniform sense of national identity to coincide with state boundaries that seldom reflect ethnic divisions on the ground. 29

Several instances can be cited from all the South Asian countries, except Maldives, to show the problem of diasporas and identity politics. Most of the majority-minority conflicts in the region are conflicts between early and recent 'Indian' immigrants, both are today, 'indigenous' population of the countries of settlement. For example, the Buddhist-Sinhalese and the Hindu-Tamils in Sri Lanka and the 'Indo-Aryan' Hindus (Paharias) and the 'Indo-Aryans' of the Tarai (Madhesis) in Nepal. In the recent years, migration problems in Pakistan have also assumed serious proportion with the ethnic conflict between the natives Sindhis and 'migrant' Mujahars, the Urdu-speaking 'migrants' from India. 30

Given this sensitive issue of migration in South Asia, studies of Indian diaspora in the region poses several 'constraints'. As S.D. Muni points out that:

... the subject is extremely sensitive both from the point of view of the Indian community as also of the host government, political system, and over all society... (and) since some major bilateral controversies have existed on the question of Indians in Sri Lanka, Burma and lately Nepal, a dispassionate and objective research in the subject does not seem to be possible. 31

29 Urmila Phadnis and Rajat Ganguly, Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001); see also Ishtiaq Ahmed, State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia (London: Pinter, 1996); V. Suryanarayan, 'Ethno-Nationalism and Nation-Building in South Asia' in N.N. Vohra, ed., Culture, Democracy and Development in South Asia (Delhi: India International Centre, 2001).

30 Phadnis and Ganguly, n. 29, p. 3.

Despite the fact that these constraints existed, a lot of studies have been done on the problems of Indian immigrants in South Asian countries, particularly, in the context of ‘Indian Tamils’ in Sri Lanka and ‘Burmese Indians’ in Myanmar (Burma). This was for the fact that the hardship endured by Indian immigrants in these countries in terms of socio-political and economic 'discrimination' by their host governments became highly explosive soon after India's independence.

On the other hand, in-depth studies on PIOs in Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Tibet are few. One of the reasons, probably, is because the problems of PIOs were not so much politicized in these countries, except Nepal. Hence, the PIOs issue had not figured as a serious issue in the bilateral context. It is true that the size of PIOs in Bhutan and Maldives is small. However, Nepal has the largest number of PIOs in South Asian countries and there has been a lot of politicization on the issue in the domestic politics, which has also effected the relations between India and Nepal.

Migrations of PIOs in South Asia is broadly classified into three phases: (1) The ancient or ‘early’ period (C.400 BC – 700AD); (2) The British colonial period (1830-1947); and (3) The post-independence period (1947 onwards).

In the ancient period, migration of people within the Indian sub-continent was a natural phenomenon. The geographical compactness and the 'closely

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33 Muni, n. 31, pp. 158-59; see also Sahadevan, n.14, p. 43.
intertwined historical processes provided easy and natural movement for people. The nature of migration is generally described as ‘assisted’ and ‘voluntary’. The distinction of the two natures of migration is made on the role of ‘organizational structure and processes’. In Nepal, history shows that a large number of people had migrated from India to Nepal during the early medieval period. This group of ‘immigrants’ today form the ‘most important racial group numerically, socially, and politically...’ In Sri Lanka, majority of the present population are immigrants from Indo-Gangetic plains, Western and Southern India. The Sinhalese, who constitute the majority community on the Island is said to be emigrants from present central India. Immigrants of South India in the Island form the Sri Lankan Tamils, migrated during the 11th century. In Myanmar (Burma), settlements of people from present India is believed to have established as early as 3rd century A.D for business such as spice trade. Most of them went from the East and West coasts through sea routes.

During this period, although ‘reverse’ migration was a common feature of the migration, a large number had settled permanently in their new settlements. Hence, a process of assimilation with the native people was a prominent feature of

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34 Muni., ibid.
35 Sahadevan, n. 14, p. 43.
38 Sahadevan, n. 14, p. 43.
these immigrants. The socio-religious influences of the immigrants on the native people and *vice versa*. The intermingling has resulted in a tremendous change of the immigrants. Today, it is therefore, ‘extremely difficult’\(^40\) to differentiate a ‘PIO’ from a native of these countries. Furthermore, these early immigrants consider themselves and by others as indigenous people in their host countries.

The second phase of migration during the nineteenth century was basically created by the British colonial rule. Under the colonial rule, the nature of migration was ‘organized’ with the government’s active role. Emigration in the second phase was organized in mainly three types: Indenture (1839-1916); *Kangani* (1833-1939); and *Maistry* (1876-1941). A large number of ‘Indians’ went to the Caribbean under the Indentured system.\(^41\) Indian emigration in South Asian countries was mainly under *Kangani* system\(^42\) and *Maistry* system\(^43\) in Sri Lanka and Burma respectively. While many ‘Indians’ went to Sri Lanka and Burma for plantation jobs and rice cultivation respectively, there was also a large number of skilled and unskilled workers who migrated to these countries to take up

\(^{40}\) Muni, n. 31, p. 159.

\(^{41}\) Indenture was a contract by which the emigrants agree to work for a given employer for five years, performing the works assigned to him for a specified wage. At the end of five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the colony, at the end of 10 years he was entitled to a subsidized return passage. See Ravindra K. Jain, *Indian Communities Abroad: Themes and Literature* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), pp. 6-8; and C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas 1838-1949* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs), pp. 8-29.

\(^{42}\) Under the *Kangani* system the government control and supervise the labour emigration through *Kanganis* (labour headmen) who were the main agents for recruitment of labours abroad. See Jain, ibid., pp. 8-9; and Kondapi, ibid., pp. 29-46.

\(^{43}\) The *Maistry* system was a labour contract system similar to the *Kangani* system. However, ‘the gradation of middlemen employers and the innumerable illegal deductions by them all from the wages of workers (besides regularized under employment) differentiated the *Maistry* system from the *Kangani* system’. See Kondapi, ibid., p. 46.
construction works and for commercial purposes. Apart from this encouragement of the British Indian government, there was also the Rana regime in Nepal that had encouraged labour force from North India for settlement in the Tarai region of Nepal for increasing the state revenue. As a result, many ‘Indians’ from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of India settled in the Tarai region of Nepal (This will be discussed in the following chapters).

One of the most significant aspects of the ‘Indian’ emigration of the nineteenth century is that it became a ‘controversial category’ in almost all the countries of their settlement after the colonial rule. Perhaps, the end of British protection and the rise of ethnic nationalism in these countries were the reasons for the aggravation of the problems of ‘Indian’ emigrants, and the ‘anti-Indian sentiments’ that were emerging in some of the countries since the early 1920s was also an important factor. Even more serious was the low level of interaction between ‘PIOs’ of the second category and the local native population. Thus, there was little assimilation. This led to social ‘exclusion’ of the ‘PIOs’ in their host countries.

Unlike the earlier phases, in the third post-colonial phase, Indian emigration dropped to a very low level. In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka, large-scale migration from India came to a stop with barring few ‘illegal immigrants’. However, Indian

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44 Sahadevan, n. 14, pp. 44-45.
46 Muni, n. 31, p.160.
migration to Nepal continued even in the post-independence era because of the provisions under the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed between India and Nepal in 1950 that allowed movement of people of both the nationals in each other country (Discussed in detail in the following chapters).

**Use of the term ‘Indian’ in Nepal**

In the study of Indian Diaspora in Nepal, much confusion has been created by the use of several nomenclatures to refer to them. Terms such as ‘Indians’, ‘Indian migrants’, ‘Indian communities’, ‘people of Indian origin’, ‘Indian-born people’ ‘Tarains’, ‘Madhesis’, etc. are used to refer both Indian nationals as well as ‘Indo-Nepalese’ of the Tarai. ‘Indians’ are generally categorized under three bases. The first category is based on the period of migration, which may be called *periodic categorization*. That is whether migration of a person occurred in the ancient and medieval times or in modern ‘recent’ period. The second category is on the national status, which can be called *legal or political categorization*. A person’s national status as to whether he/she holds a Nepali citizenship or an Indian citizenship is the main decisive factor in this categorization. And the third is the *cultural categorization*. Under this category, one may include a person’s culture, language, dress and ties with India as determinants.

Most of the scholars⁴⁷ have identified three broad categories of ‘Indians’ in the Himalayan Kingdom. The first category consists of those ‘Indians’ who

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migrated to Nepal centuries ago (Periodic) and had got assimilated with the local population. Today, this category of people identifies themselves as Nepalese in all aspects of life. The present ruling Shah dynasty belongs to this category.48

The second category comprise of ‘Indians’ who had migrated in the ‘recent’ past and have settled permanently in Nepal (Periodic). This group of people had acquired or has the desire to acquire Nepali citizenship (Legal). This category of people still maintains ties with India (Cultural).

The third category composed of ‘seasonal’ or ‘floating’ migrants. They are Indian nationals (Legal), who may or may not have the desire to settle permanently in Nepal but seek job opportunities.

Thus, the above categorisations of ‘Indians’ are based on the three categories identified earlier, i.e., period of migration; political or legal status; and cultural linkages.

The categorization of ‘Indians’ in Nepal is all encompassing. Some scholars prefer to categorize ‘Indians’ only on their legal status. For instance, Parmanand has narrowed down ‘Indians’ into two sets of population. According to him, the first set includes those Indian nationals who embark on various activities and have no intention of becoming Nepali citizens. And the second set comprise of ‘Nepalese of Indian origin’ or ‘Madhesis’.49

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49 See Muni, n. 31, p.159; and R. Shaha, n. 45, p. 280.

There has been a serious debate on the question of who is a person of
'Indian origin' in Nepal. These debates seem to have gained momentum since
1990s. Different people hold different views on the question. Krishna Khannel
opined that the 'caste groups' are considered as people of Indian origin in Nepal.\(^{50}\)
However, he pointed out that all caste groups of Nepal are not people of Indian
origin. According to him, one can determine the origin of a person by considering
his 'home place' of origin. From Khannel's view, it seems that the 'people of
Indian origin' would include all caste-groups of both the hill and the plain and
Muslims of the Tarai and Kathmandu, who migrated to Nepal during the past few
centuries. But when he said that 'not all are PIO', he seems to suggest that the
'plain' people are of 'Indian origin'. However, some 'Madhesis' counter such
views and hold that 'Indian origin' includes all caste-groups of Nepal.
Commenting on the complexities that surround the term 'Indian origin', Krishna
Hachhethu said 'it is very difficult to pin point one as a person of Indian origin'.\(^{51}\)

Mahanth Thakur, a senior Nepali Congress leader has pointed out that there
exists a confusion that 'all people in the Tarai are of Indian origin', but 'not all
people in the Tarai are of Indian origin', he asserted.\(^{52}\) According to him, language
forms the basis for the origin of any ethnic group. In Nepal, there are two
languages: Tibeto-Burman family and Indo-Aryan family. He, therefore, questions
why only the people of Tarai are called 'Indian origin' while the Nepali-speaking

\(^{50}\) Personal interview with Krishna Khannel, Kirtipur, July 27, 2003.
\(^{51}\) Personal interview with Krishna Hachhethu, Kirtipur, August 10, 2003.
\(^{52}\) Personal interview with Mahanth Thakur, Kathmandu, July 30, 2003.
people are not, as their language also belong to the Indo-Aryan family. He argues that 'when Nepali culture was defined; only those people speaking Nepali language were defined as Nepali. While in this definition of Nepali culture, the Tarai people are totally excluded.'

Some Nepali scholars, while referring to 'Indians', make a distinction between the early Hindu emigrants of the hill and the recent (19th century) emigrants, majority of whom settled in the Tarai plains of Nepal. The Hills Hindu emigrants are referred to in racial term as Indo-Aryans, and not 'Indians'. The descendents of the high-caste Hindus who fled to Nepal during the Muslim invasion and got assimilated with the local people constitute this group. Today, they form 'the most prominent' group socially and politically. Whereas, the population settled in the Tarai are called 'Indian origin'. Many of them were immigrants who were encouraged by the Rana regime of Nepal in the 19th century to settle in the Tarai region. Majority of this group was composed of tenants and peasants from the bordering Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This kind of distinction seems to have certain political meanings.

Dilli Ram Dahal used the term 'Indian ethnic groups' to refer to the caste-groups of Tarai in his study. Dahal included almost all the caste-Hindu communities and Muslims of the Tarai in the category. V.B.S. Kansakar has observed that any person who speaks Hindi language is considered 'Indian' in

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53 Shrestha, n. 45, pp. 165-166; and Joshi and Rose, n. 37, p. 10.
Here, language is used to determine a person’s origin. However, he raised a vital definitional problem by questioning whether ‘Nepali Indians’ or ‘Nepali-speaking Indians’, who returns to Nepal, could be defined as ‘Indian origin’. The definitional problem exists with this group.

However, this study does not take into account this category for study because of two reasons. First, the local Nepalese do not perceive of this category as ‘Indians’. Secondly, because of this perception, they are not ‘discriminated’ socially, economically, and politically by the state machinery.

C.K. Lal has pointed out that the term ‘Indian origin’ is filled with ‘ambiguity’. He defines ‘Indians’ as those who had come to Nepal after 1947, when India become independent. He argues that ‘India is a civilization with thousands of cultures and not a country’

Hence, there are number of problems in defining the term ‘Indians’ or persons of ‘Indian origin’, at the conceptual level in the context of Nepal. This has given enough room for perceptions and misperceptions among the people about the terms, which is but only obvious. In Nepal, ‘Indians’ connotes different meaning to different people. For many hill people (Pahari) of generally Mongoloid origin, any person with ‘dark-brown complexion’, wear ‘dhoti’ and speak Hindi is perceived as an ‘Indian’ or a ‘person of Indian origin’, irrespective of his nationality. This perception still exists among many hill people that reinforce the political objectives

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of the State. Hence, the purpose of this study would be to explore the political objectives of labeling certain communities as ‘Indians’ or ‘Indian origin’.

The term ‘Madhesi’

It seems proper to introduce the term ‘Madhesi’ at this juncture, as it would be employed in the course of the study. The term would be employed not because it evidently defines the people of Indian origin but because the term is increasingly been used by both the people in the hills and the plains to refer to a large section of the Indian diaspora. However, it should be noted that some scholars doubt the efficacy of the term ‘Madhesi’ as a tool for academic analysis.57

The word is derived from Sanskrit, Madhyadesh meaning the ‘middle country’ between the foothills of the Himalayan Mountain in the north and the Bindhyla mountain in the south and people living in this region came to be known as ‘Madheshis or Madheshiyas’.58 According to Lal, when the Aryans came 1600 years ago, they refer the Tarai region as ‘Madhyadesh or central country’. However, when the Nepali rulers came, they corrupted it as ‘Badesh’ and refer the

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57 For instance, Dilli R. Dahal observes that ‘the research tool of regionalism, such as the Madhesiya vs. Pahadiya model, lacks analytical depth in explaining the processes and change(s) that are taking place in the Tarai over the last 40 years. This model has neglected the history of the Tarai groups and their distinct cultural identity, separate and different from each other. There was no such pan-Tarai culture either in the past or at present. Except for indicating the ‘geographical identity’, the concept of Madhese can go little further even to develop as a working hypothesis.’ See Dilli R. Dahal, ‘Madhese, Regionalism and National Integration: A Case of Nepal Tarai’, Nepali Journal of Contemporary Studies, vol. II, no. 1, 2002, p. 12.

‘indigenous’ people like the Tharus as ‘Badeshis’. It was only of late that ‘Badhesi’ become ‘Madhesi’. 59

From Lal’s idea, it seems that he include the ‘indigenous’ groups such as the Tharus as Madhesis. However, some scholars have another view. Harald O. Skar, in his study of the Rana Tharus of Tarai, refer to the ‘tribal’ groups such as the Tharus, Rajbansis, Satars, Dunawars and Darias as ‘indigenous’ people of the region. While, he used the term Madhesi to refer to the ‘immigrants from India’.

In this context, it is interesting to note the view of the Madhesi National Liberation Front (MNLF). 61 A pamphlet circulated by the MNLF states, ‘we, Madhesi community, are the Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi language speaking community who have been living in Nepal from east to west since medieval times. We will run our own governmental system separately on Bhojpuri, Maithili and Awadh region making ethnic right of self-determination as its base’. 62 This perception of Madhesi is similar to the views of some Madhesi leaders. Rajendra Mahato, Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Anand Devi) leader, opines that ‘Madhesi is a community having its own distinct identity’ reflected in their ‘culture, language, and dress’ and they speak ‘Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Maithili, Hindi, and Marwari’. 63


61 Madhesi National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed in April 2001 by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).


63 Interview with Rajendra Mahato, New Delhi, 28 April 2005.
Madhesi International, an organization ‘for madhesis to fight for their due
dights and dignity’, defines the term Madhesi as ‘a person from lowland (Tarai) of
Nepal, who is of Indian-origin orientations and racial roots’.64

There is a strong view that is now emerging among the ‘Madhesi’
intellectuals which distinguishes ‘Indian origin Madhesi’ and ‘Nepali origin
Madhesi’ or in other words, Madhesis of Indian origin and Madhesis of Nepali
origin. For instance, Chandra Kishore Jha, the editor of *Terai News Magazine*, is of
the opinion that Nepali origin Madhesis are the indigenous people of the Tarai,
while Indian origin Madhesis are those migrated to the Tarai from India after
1950.65 This view gives a perspective to the confusion of whether all the Madhesis
are of ‘Indian origin’.

Geographically, *madhesh* means ‘mid-land’ or ‘low-land’. Culturally,
however, the term implies an ‘inferior place’. This negative image of the Tarai,
according to Shrestha, ‘could have been linked to its deadly malarial and relatively
uncivilized environment’.66 The term thus connotes a negative meaning to mean
‘an alien or an uncivilized immigrant from northern India’.67 The term Madhesi is
used as a synonymous to ‘people of Indian origin’ by the hill people or ‘Paharis’.

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64 Madhesi International website also provides the organisation’s aims and ideology [Online: web]
65 This view is also hold by some other Madhesi intellectuals. Interview with Chandra Kishore Jha,
Birjung, 10 June 2005.
66 Shrestha, n. 45, pp. 165-66.
67 Ibid.
As Parmanand observes that the term is employed ‘disparagingly’ for the people of Indian origin in Nepal.  

As the Madhesis live in the Tarai region of Nepal, they are sometimes called ‘Taraiwallas’ or ‘Tarains’. Still another name given to this people is ‘dhotiwallas’ (wearers of dhoti). C.K Lal had tried to popularize ‘Taraili’ and ‘Taraibhasi’, which; however, could not catch people’s attention. A question may be asked why caste-groups in the hills are not called Madhesi as some of them are the descendents of emigrants from India. Two possible reasons could be that: first, the Hindus of the hills share the same ‘hill-valley’ or ‘Parbatias’ culture and speak the hills’ language – Nepali. Secondly, because they live in the hills and as the term Madhesi is a topographic reference, they are not included. It should also be noted that today this people prefer to call themselves Nepalese without been labeled as ‘Indians’.

Hence, Indo-Nepalese people of the Tarai include those who migrated from India to Nepal since the second-half of the nineteenth century and thereafter. However, the legality of the definition is problematic, as many Indo-Nepalese do not possess Nepali citizenship certificate. This would mean that two sets of population constitute Indo-Nepalese of Nepal Tarai. They are:

68 Parmanand, n. 49, p. 288.
69 This is a name given to differentiate with the ‘hill’ people or the ‘Gorkhalis’ or ‘Parbatias’. The ‘Parbatias’ are called ‘topiwallas’ (wearers of caps). See Kapileshwar Labh, ‘Ethnic Factor in the Himalayan Kingdoms’, International Studies, vol. 32, no. 3, 1995, p. 285.
70 C. K. Lal told this researcher during the interview.
71 Upreti in a footnote observes that this hill people do not prefer to call themselves as ‘Indian migrants’. See Upreti, n. 47, p. 97.
1. Any person of Indo-Aryan family settled in the Tarai and possess Nepali citizenship and is therefore a Nepali in legal terms, and

2. Any person of Indo-Aryan family in the Tarai and does not possess Nepali citizenship certificate but also does not hold or wish to hold Indian citizenship and therefore, technically, a stateless person residing in Nepal.

The present study would use the term Indo-Nepalese as defined above to refer to only those persons of the nineteenth century migration phenomenon and thereafter. This category of people cannot be treated as ‘Indian migrants’ because they are Nepalese by any definition. The term ‘Indo-Nepali’ has been employed by others earlier. For instance, Nanda Shrestha used the term ‘Indo-Nepali’ to refer to ‘two distinct categories’:

The first category includes those who fled India and moved to the safe sanctuaries of the Nepal hills several hundred years ago, in the wake of the Muslim invasions of northern India. The hill group of Indian origin – popularly known as the pahari (hill dwellers) – includes descendants of high-caste Hindus, mostly of Brahman and Kshatriyas (Chhetri) status… This segment of the Indo-Nepali population, at the apex of which stands the royal family, has played the most dominant role in local as well as national politics and governance. Other ethnic groups, including those of Indian origin that settled in the Tarai and, with some exception of Kathmandu, Newars have been peripheral to the political power structure controlled by the nexus of high-caste and dominant-class elites.\(^\text{72}\)

The second group of the ‘Indo-Nepali’ identified by Shrestha is those ‘Tarai inhabitants’ or ‘Madhesis’. He states:

The second group of Indo-Nepali people primarily includes Tarai inhabitants excluding hill migrants in the region. Generally

identified as the *madhesi*, they were relocated to Nepal from northern India. Most of them were actually encouraged by the government of Nepal or its agents to move into the Tarai for settlement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the country was attempting to expand its revenue base through agricultural land settlement. Although some of those Indian migrants later became large landowners in the Tarai, most of them remain peasants with small tracts of land or no land at all. They belong to different sub-ethnic groups with their own respective dialects as the primary medium of communication. Although their facility with Nepali has greatly improved over the years, they use it only when necessary.\(^{73}\)

This study will focus on the second group of Indo-Nepalese. The term Indo-Nepalese is preferred over other terms because it characterizes a cultural and ethnic connotation rather than political. Secondly, the concept of ‘Nepal’ came to exist under a unified ruler in the mid nineteenth century, on the one hand, and the notion of ‘India’ under British India became fairly popular by the turn of nineteenth century.

Both Madhesi and Indo-Nepalese would be employed interchangeably; as many Nepalese view the Madhesis as Indo-Nepalese and vice-versa. However, not all Indo-Nepalese are Madhesis in both cultural and geographical sense. For instance, Marwaris, Sikhs and Kashmiris who have settled in Kathmandu cannot be called Madhesi in cultural or geographical sense. At the same time, not all Madhesis are Indo-Nepalese. For instance, the ‘indigenous’ groups like the Tharus and some Maithils caste groups may not be treated as Indo-Nepalese because they have not migrated from India to the present settlement but instead they are the ‘original’ settlers of the land.

\(^{73}\) Ibid.
It is important to note that the study shall also employ certain terms such as 'Indian migrants' and 'Indian community'. Here, the term Indian community will be used to refer to Indian nationals residing in Nepal and therefore it should not be misunderstood to include the Indo-Nepalese. Again, the term Indian migrants will be deployed here to refer only to the third category of people discussed earlier, i.e. the 'seasonal' or 'floating' migrants.

It has already been noted that the varied used of nomenclatures has not simplified the study but instead made the study more complex. Keeping this in mind and with the aim to make the study more simplistic and clear, terms will be used as minimum as possible and for relevant contexts only. However, it should also be borne in mind that this is a difficult exercise and may do injustice, if the study does not use the terms in the available literatures. And also the referential terms to be employed here for the present study are not absolute.