

Outposts of Trade: Migration Patterns of the Nisyang Traders of Nepal

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Introduction

Two main patterns of voluntary migration are significant in the commercial activity of the Nisyang traders of Nepal. The first of these involves migration from the Nisyang valley homeland, a remote valley along Nepal's northern border with Tibet, to Kathmandu, Nepal's capital and principal urban center. The second pattern involves international migration from Kathmandu to trading centers in India and Southeast Asia. Although there are differences in the social organization of internal and international migration, the migratory patterns are interrelated in other respects. The chief aim of what follows is to delineate the economic and social connections between village homeland, urban center, and international trade outposts while making clear the differences in the organization of migration between these points. Before proceeding further, however, it is appropriate to provide some basic points of background. Accordingly, the main concerns of the paper will be taken up after a brief introduction to the ethnographic and historic background of Nisyang migration and to the circumstances of field research which directed my interest to the topic.

The Background

The Nisyang valley is located in Manang District (Gandaki Zone) in the high mountain region of west-central Nepal. From January 1982 through December 1983, Nisyang was the principal site for research which I conducted on issues of ethnic identity and ethnic change. Although the explicit focus of my research was that portion of the population still inhabiting the villages of Nisyang, I quickly realized that I could not account for circumstances in the valley without referring to a wider sphere of activity. This wider sphere comprises both urban centers within Nepal, such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Narayanghat, and trade centers in India and Southeast Asia, such as Calcutta, Bangkok, and Hong Kong. The crucial importance of this wider sphere of activity for village society is most evident in two areas: economic and demographic. Economically, trading activities outside the Nisyang valley are more important to the domestic economy of Nisyang households than are those activities, mainly agriculture and herding, localized within the valley. Demographically, there is a constant movement of personnel between village and urban locales, directly affecting the allocation of household labor, the composition of village leadership councils, and other aspects of village life. Yet, while the connections between the Nisyang village homeland and this wider sphere of activity were easy to appreciate, it was less easy to develop a methodology to comprehend such far-flung activity. In order to point out some of these difficulties (and this is important for making explicit limitations of the data which follow), it is necessary to introduce more fully the history and current organization of Nisyang trade.

The Nisyang traders belong to a small, ethnically distinct community inhabiting the upper reaches of the Marsyangdi valley in west-central Nepal. The border with Tibet lies only about ten air miles to the northeast of this valley but the intervening Peri Himal mountains of the Great Himalayan Range make direct contact between these two points difficult. Other geographic barriers to the south and west combine to create effective isolation for the Nisyang valley. Historically, this geographic isolation has inhibited any significant involvement by Nisyang traders in the local salt-grain trade. This trade, involving an exchange of salt mined in the Tibetan plateau for grain from the lowlands of Nepal and northern plains India, had long provided local communities along the Nepal-Tibet border with a network of markets for seasonal barter. The people of Nisyang, being at a disadvantage in the geography of local trade routes, but still in need of trading income to supplement a marginal subsistence of agriculture and herding, turned elsewhere. Traditionally, traders from Nisyang travelled south to trade centers reached through Nepal's border with India. Because this route took them across international borders and through customs checkpoints, the trade fell under bureaucratic regulation by the central authorities in Kathmandu. Through a category of bureaucratic correspondence (*lal mohar*), it is possible to reconstruct the essential characteristics of this pattern of trade as it existed a century ago. A document dated 1884 shows that the main route to India in that year was through the railhead at Nautanwa, that the goods which were taken as trade items along this route were items of little value but of local availability in Nisyang, such as the bark of birch trees, and that this trade operated under a government-sanctioned customs tax exemption. The general outlines of this trade pattern remained substantially unchanged until about 1960, as trading histories of older informants reveal. The importance of various trade commodities and of specific trade routes varied somewhat during this seventy-five-year period. But, throughout, the trade was oriented to the lands beyond Nepal's southern border, characterized by goods requiring minimal capital investment (usually of local origin), and protected by a government customs tax exemption.

Over the past twenty-five years, important changes have occurred in the commodities which the Nisyang people trade, in the trade routes which they follow, and in the governmental regulations under which their trade operates. One important change dates back to the time when Nisyang traders began to realize large profits by trafficking anatomical organs of certain animals local to the Nisyang valley. Organs of local animals like the musk gland of the male musk deer commanded such high prices from Chinese pharmacists in Calcutta and Singapore that profits from this trade fundamentally altered the capital basis of subsequent trade. The change was, in fact, so fundamental that it can be seen as the historical pivot point in the development of Nisyang trade: the continuity with all previous trade was its reliance on items of local availability requiring little capital investment; the continuity with subsequent trade was its involvement with low-bulk, high value commodities, some of which (like the musk gland) contravene export regulations. Although the musk deer is now almost extinct in the Nisyang valley, many traders continue this involvement with the transport of low-bulk, high-value items by legally importing luxury consumer goods and by illegally importing gold (this latter fact is a matter of public record). Trade in low-bulk, high-value merchandise requires, of course, high capital investment, but the windfall from the trade in animal organs coupled with traditional patterns of cooperation within the group have made such large amounts of capital available.

This pivotal change in the commodities of trade coincided with a shift in trade routes followed by the majority of Nisyang traders. The traditional overland routes via the British-Indian railway system and overseas routes via steamship from Calcutta and Madras were gradually superseded by air travel once air service was established linking Kathmandu with major cities of north India and later Southeast Asia. Currently, the three

principal destinations for trade are Bangkok, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Although it is not useful to enter into the regulatory details of trade in these three international centers, a few simple points may be made. First, the nature of trading activity in each of these three centers is somewhat different. Hong Kong is currently the primary market for Nisyang trade. Singapore is, generally speaking, the locus of trade for groups of Nisyang traders who lack either the capital resources or entrepreneurial drive to engage in the more challenging Hong Kong market. Bangkok, by way of contrast to both Singapore and Hong Kong, is not so much a center of trade as it is a logistical center for transport to Kathmandu of goods purchased elsewhere.

Second, the commodities of trade differ from market to market. In Singapore, the most prevalent pattern of trade involves the hawking of petty commodities (originally of Nepalese origin but now increasingly of Thai origin) on the sidewalks and in the night markets. Profits from these sales are then invested in the purchase of merchandise in Singapore, usually electronic consumer goods, which are transported back to Kathmandu for resale in the restricted domestic and Indian markets. In Hong Kong, Nisyang traders do not attempt to sell any goods; instead, they engage full time in the purchase and transport of goods available there. Although there is a basic similarity between Singapore and Hong Kong in the varieties of luxury consumer goods purchased, Hong Kong differs further in being the principal source for gold.

Migration from Village to Urban Locales

Having outlined the background of current trading activity, it is now possible to turn to the first of the two patterns of migration identified at the outset. This is the pattern of internal or domestic migration between the Nisyang valley, the remote homeland of the Nisyang people, and Kathmandu.

The current pattern of internal migration is closely related to a traditional pattern of seasonal migration which is connected with ecological conditions in the Nisyang valley. Located at high altitudes (the major villages of Nisyang vary in altitude from approximately 3,000 m and 3,500 m) and situated so as to receive the full force of winds funneled up the valley, the villages of Nisyang experience extremely harsh winters. Traditionally, the people of Nisyang have taken advantage of the freedom from agricultural and herding demands in winter to leave the valley for trading ventures in warmer areas. The range and duration of these trading absences varied widely in the past—some households simply relocated to areas lower in the valley such as Shumrebar (Bhote Odar) for a period of two to three months; some households left for slightly longer periods and passed the winter in urban centers of Nepal such as Narayanghat and Kathmandu; others left for periods of several years as they travelled overland to locations in India and Southeast Asia. During their absence from Nisyang, individual households would make arrangements, usually with older kinsmen who chose to remain in the village, to have their livestock fed on a daily basis and to have their roofs kept clear of snow.

Over the past two decades, there has been a gradual transformation of this traditional pattern of seasonal migration. In general, this transformation has reflected the heightened importance of trading within the overall local economy following the success of the trade in anatomical organs. Although the specifics of the change as seen at the household level vary internally (in terms of the changing labor resources of a single household at different points of the domestic cycle) and externally (in terms of the relative affluence of different households), the general pattern of change is clear. Households now attempt to maximize their involvement in urban-based international trade by establishing one or more household members in Kathmandu on a year-round, rather than seasonal, basis. In other words, for

most Nisyang households, trade is no longer a seasonal activity pursued by entire households; it is, instead, a full-time activity pursued by individual household members whose labor can be spared from herding and agricultural activities in the village. In many cases, this urban-based trade is the responsibility of young males who have reached the age of social maturity (as informally validated by membership in the *phée* social category at the time of puberty) but who have not yet married. Frequently, they will continue involvement with urban-based trade after marriage, in spite of customary expectations of their return to the village, if economic circumstances and temperament permit. Women generally remain in the villages except in cases of permanent urban residence, as defined by ownership of a house, or semi-permanent residence, as defined by ownership of land without attached real property. Urban-based women may engage in international trade today but their status as corporate members of trade groups is usually limited.

In addition to the change from seasonal to year-round trade, the traditional pattern of migration has been transformed in another important respect. Before 1960, all Nisyang traders based their households in Nisyang villages but, since the success of the trade in anatomical organs, there has been a growing tendency for successful traders to establish primary household residence in Kathmandu. Although the factors underlying this tendency are too complex for detailed consideration here, one basic observation is pertinent: in theory and in practice, household capital resources are the single major factor determining whether Nisyang households relocate to Kathmandu on a permanent basis. Residence in Kathmandu is recognized almost universally as advantageous for trading purposes and as prestigious in status terms; more to the point, there is a strong correlation between the wealthiest members of the Nisyang community and those members who have established permanent residence in Kathmandu. In view of this, the fact that the majority of Nisyang households do not make a permanent move to Kathmandu must be seen in terms of their inability to free themselves from economic dependence on agriculture and herding in the village and to secure capital accumulation sufficient for long-term trading activity in Kathmandu. As of December 1983, a survey of Nisyang-owned houses in Kathmandu showed approximately sixty houses out of a total population, village and urban, of roughly 5,000 people. Given this extent of permanent migration, what then is the nature of social linkage between the village and urban locales? To answer this question, both economic connections and relations of a more social nature need be examined.

Economically, one manifestation of the interrelation between urban and rural locales can be seen in the process of formation of *tshong roo* trade groups. The *tshong roo* ("selling friend") are the corporate trade groups which control the resources vital to success in the Nisyang trade niche. The process by which individuals come together to form *tshong roo* trade groups is directly connected with the control of capital resources, the determining factor in permanent migration to Kathmandu. For male children of village households, it is generally possible to obtain passports at the age of 14 even though the official age of eligibility is 16. By obtaining a passport, it becomes possible to engage in urban-based trade. The initial trading experience of an adolescent male whose father is not actively engaged in urban-based trade is likely to be in the *tshong roo* trading group of a relative already established in Kathmandu. This relative will provide, in addition to room and board, a limited amount of capital and will introduce the newcomer to the complexities of the trade, though not in the status of a full *tshong roo* member. In one case with which I am familiar, a newcomer was given over \$10,000 working capital by two Kathmandu-based relatives. In the case of profit, the original loans were to be repaid in full and any surplus divided three ways; in the case of loss, the newcomer was to repay one-sixth of the amount of the loss to each lender.

These forms of assistance are recognized as obligations incumbent upon close kinsmen (both within the patrilineals and matrilineally), especially for those who have prospered. It should be recognized, however, that there are economic advantages to both parties in the relationship. The newcomer, in exchange for capital resources and training, performs tasks for the group which entail high risk and/or low esteem and which entitle him to only a small portion of the profits. If the individual is able to take advantage of the capital resources and training to realize substantial and sustained profits both for himself and for his sponsor, there is some likelihood that he will eventually become accepted as a full tshong roo member. In the more likely event that the individual is not able to overcome the disabilities of his status, he will begin to chafe at his subservience within the group and search for trading opportunities elsewhere. Commonly, he will use whatever capital he has accumulated through association with his relative's tshong roo group to contribute to the formation of a new tshong roo group. In the new tshong roo group he will be a full and equal member with others who share roughly equal capital resources. It should be pointed out that a new tshong roo group of this type, controlling limited capital resources and of unproven creditworthiness, is unlikely to gain any foothold in the most highly capitalized forms of trade. It is these forms of trade which are, at once, the most reliable and the most profitable. For this reason, it is unlikely that the new tshong roo group will realize profits sufficient to free the households of its members from partial dependence on village agriculture and herding. The tshong roo members' status as temporary migrants unable to meet the economic requirements of permanent migration is in this way structurally maintained.

The second major form of economic interrelationship between the village homeland and Kathmandu involves remittances. A portion of profits from urban-based trade is routinely sent back to family members still living in villages in the Nisyang valley. To cite one example, the total of remittances for one year to a six-member household of average wealth (corresponding to the emic category *a-plo a-tuuba*: "neither rich nor poor") with one family member engaged in urban-based trade amounted to \$1500 in 1983. Like most households, this family used cash in excess of everyday needs to sponsor ritual and community events. Even for a "poor" individual (*tuuba*), the income from remittances in Nisyang is considerably greater than the total cash income documented for wealthy rural communities elsewhere in Nepal (MacFarlane 1976:186; Caplan 1970:80).

Despite the high value of remittances in Nisyang relative to other areas of Nepal, their value is modest relative to the amounts retained by the urban-based traders for their own expenses in Kathmandu. The reason for this has less to do with the actual cost of living in Kathmandu than with the effects of status pressure within a small community enjoying a great amount of unevenly distributed wealth. Rather than living frugally in order to send larger remittances home or to amass greater capital resources for future trade, urban-based traders tend to spend disproportionately to maintain a high-status lifestyle. Items such as motorcycles, refrigerators, and fashionable clothes help marginally successful traders keep their status in the eyes of more affluent urban residents. This tendency is especially pronounced for young urban-based traders due to age-graded differences in attitude to Buddhist charity and piety. Young traders, not yet at the stage of life in which religious concerns predominate, are reluctant to see the greater part of their profits going to the sponsorship of Buddhist rites by elder family members in the valley. They therefore tend to limit their remittances to the valley on the grounds that, unlike Kathmandu, there is "nothing to buy" there.

Finally, there are a variety of social obligations—political, kin-based, and ritual—which tie urban-based traders to the village. Politically, decisions which transcend the interest of particular villages and affect the valley as a whole are recognized as the prerogative of community leaders in Kathmandu (*thyeeb mi* or “big men”). A concrete expression of this influence is the fact that these “big men” control the funds which are used to finance certain projects in the valley, such as a hydroelectric project currently under construction. Bilateral kinship connections also serve to tie together urban and rural locales. In addition to a constant exchange of correspondence and small gifts between urban- and village-based relatives, the latter will frequently spend the winter months in the homes of the former. Ritually, there is formal recognition of the obligation of urban-based traders to attend ritual events and festivals in the village. Failure to attend is punishable by fine (*thim*). This formal system of obligation should not, however, be construed in itself as evidence of a tight connection between urban and rural locales. The amounts of the fines are fixed at traditional levels, trivially low by contemporary standards. The majority of urban-based traders choose routinely to miss these events and to pay the small fines which their absence entails.

International Migration

Organizationally, international migration by the Nisyang people differs from the pattern of internal migration just described. Before considering these differences, however, it is important to clarify what defines an international migrant among the Nisyang people. Most simply, the same criteria of house ownership and primary residence which distinguish permanent internal migrants can be used to define international migrants. This differentiates international migrants from the large number of itinerant traders who sojourn in foreign countries without owning a house there as their primary residence. International migrants can likewise be distinguished from itinerant traders by additional, largely overlapping criteria: 1) in cases of migration, the migrant (always a Nisyang male) takes his wife from the host population, but in cases of long-term itinerant residence, the trader is either unmarried or married to a Nepali citizen; 2) in instances of itinerant trade, a Nisyang individual who resides in a foreign country for a long period of time still maintains formal economic ties to a tshong roo group, but in cases of migration, formal business obligations of this type usually lapse; and finally 3) the distinction is recognized as significant by the people of Nisyang themselves—migrants are not expected to return to Nisyang for any social or ritual purpose and their absence from community events does not require the payment of fines (*thim*).

This distinction between itinerant trade and international migration restricts the field of Nisyang migration of which I have knowledge to less than ten migrants in Malaysia, Thailand, and India. (In what follows, I have eliminated migrants to India from the discussion because their case requires explanation of a different set of background considerations.) The proportion of migrants to itinerant traders in Malaysia and Thailand is therefore extremely small, but the linkages between these two categories are nonetheless economically important.

Malaysia's importance to Nisyang trade lies chiefly in its proximity to Singapore, a main center of Nisyang international trade, and secondarily as a source of semiprecious gemstones, an important trade item. As concerns proximity, Malaysia is important as an overland transit route to Singapore from Bangkok. What makes Malaysia's proximity to Singapore especially advantageous to Nisyang traders, however, is the laxness of visa regulations there in contrast to the strictly enforced visa policy of Singapore. Travel expenses from Kathmandu to Singapore are high, profits from the hawking of petty commodities in

the streets and night markets of Singapore are low, and the time required to turn an overall net profit generally far exceeds the limited time granted Nepal passport holders by Singapore's immigration authorities. The trader's solution to this problem is to use Malaysia as a touching-down point or as a base for repeated commercial forays into Singapore. Malaysia also provides Nisyang traders with a major source of inexpensive gemstones, comparable to earlier sources of gemstones in Rajasthan, India and in Burma. The trade involving these gemstones was at its highest from 1965 to 1975, during the peak years of American military involvement in Southeast Asia. During that time, Nisyang traders sold gemstones, either in loose or mounted form, to military personnel in areas of high American presence, such as Pattaya (Thailand), Wanchai (Hong Kong), and Saigon (Vietnam). Currently, the trade in gemstones is considerably reduced in both scale and significance. Gemstones are most commonly procured on the east coast of Malaysia, where the economy is depressed and prices low, then transported to the wealthier markets of Penang (Malaysia) and Singapore, where they are sold on the street to nationals and foreign tourists.

Because I did not include Nisyang trade routes in my field research, I must rely on oral accounts by experienced traders for my information concerning relations with international migrants. According to the estimates of these informants, there are usually between 50 and 100 Nisyang traders in Malaysia and Singapore at any given time, though this figure is subject to seasonal fluctuation. To my knowledge, there is only one Nisyang migrant in Malaysia. Significantly, that individual has established his residence on the east coast where he does retail business in gemstones. This location is not advantageous for traders who are entering Malaysia simply for visa purposes and the migrant household apparently plays no role in that movement. The role of the migrant household as a source of gemstones for itinerant Nisyang traders is, however, important. Even in the absence of detailed information regarding varying degrees of cooperation between the migrant household and various tshong roo groups, it is clear that cooperation has been generally close. Some informants suggest that all of the migrant's business transactions involve Nisyang traders, though it seems likely that these statements reflect pride in group cohesiveness and are not to be taken as literal.

Migration to Thailand, involving at least three individuals, shows a similar emphasis on group cooperation. Although cooperation in Thailand does not take as highly specific a form as in the Malaysian gem trade, migrants to Thailand assist itinerant traders with a range of services which are facilitated by local contacts. These range from obtaining visas and passports to arranging transshipment of merchandise. Unlike the Malaysian case, some of the migrants to Thailand continue to shuttle between Kathmandu and Bangkok with the same frequency as itinerant traders, sometimes even as tshong roo members. Despite these close connections to Kathmandu-based itinerant traders, I am not aware of any direct relations between these migrants and village residents in the Nisyang valley.

Because data on migrants to Malaysia and Thailand derive from second-hand reports rather than from first-hand research, I will not attempt to describe their relations with the Kathmandu-based trading community beyond the basic economic ties just outlined. It is worthwhile, however, to single out two cases which reveal in strikingly different ways the closeness of ties between migrants and itinerant traders. One case involves two individuals who are not numbered among current migrants since they have taken Nisyang wives and now maintain primary residence in Kathmandu. They both formerly owned houses in Thailand, however, and for that reason can be considered as past migrants. During that period, their houses were used for accommodations and storage of merchandise by different parties of tshong roo on a paid basis. The second case involves an individual who, as a target of criticism for his uncooperativeness, makes normal standards of social

behavior within the community more comprehensible. This person lives in the natal village of his Thai wife and avoids all contact with Nisyang itinerant traders. It would be difficult to try to account for this individual's behavior without referring to personality factors; however, one social consideration is relevant. Ongoing relations of cooperation are one of the principal bases of the maintenance of Nisyang identity. Individuals who sever all ties of cooperation are effectively casting off Nisyang identity in all but a genealogical sense. Cases of individuals "disappearing" in this way from the Nisyang ethnic group are not common but are known in the Nepalese context. From this perspective, this particular case might best be considered not as an instance of international migration but as a casting off of ethnic identity.

Conclusions

In the foregoing, there has been evidence of both differences and similarities in the pattern of internal and international migration of the Nisyang people. Internal migration is seen as a general response by village households to profitable trade opportunities attainable from a base in Kathmandu. For households of limited capital resources, the extent of migration is closely connected to the changing labor resources of the household through time. Temporary migrants from such households may be dependent upon permanent migrants, who are usually also kinsmen, for housing, training, and capital in Kathmandu. Permanent migrants are generally the most successful traders—those whose profit margins free them from dependence on a village-based economy and whose capital resources make such profit margins possible. Independence from village agriculture and herding does not, however, entail a severing of other ties to the village for permanent urban residents. The greater wealth of permanent migrants gives them a preeminent voice in community leadership even in matters directly concerning the valley. In addition, they retain a variety of kin-based and ritual obligations to the village locale. Temporary and permanent migrants both conduct trade in tshong roo groups; however, frictions arising from disparities of capital and credit tend to produce segregation between those tshong roo made up of permanent migrants and those comprising temporary migrants.

The organization of international migration reveals a different but related form for exploiting trading opportunities. International migrants, even in the absence of formal tshong roo membership, continue to be involved in Nisyang trading activities. Inhabiting points along international routes of Nisyang trade and forging personal links there through marriage and residence, these migrants are, in a sense, manning the outposts of Nisyang trade. Just as their residence abroad depends upon enduring cooperation with itinerant traders, their small number seems related to the limited demand for such outposts by the community as a whole. In the one case where residence abroad was not related to the economic activities of the group, the individual is, in an important sense, no longer a member of the group.

Despite differences in the organization of internal and international migration—differences in economic structuring and social ordering as well as in scale—there is a fundamental sense in which the two migratory patterns are intimately connected. Both patterns reveal a response, conditioned by household circumstance, to different sorts of trading opportunity. Considered together, internal and international migration reveal a web of relations connecting village homeland to urban trading base to international trade centers. Although not of uniform coherence, these connections are the basis of identity for a mobile and far-flung entrepreneurial group.

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