

Lores and Lyrics of *Basain Sarain* in the Select Works of Prajwal Parajuly

Dr. Jemima Sakum Phipon

Assistant Professor, Department of English

M.U.C Women's College, Burdwan

Email- jemimaphipon.jp@gmail.com | Orcid id: [0009-0007-4819-3314](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4819-3314)

Abstract

This paper looks at how *basai sarai*, migration has been an integral part of the life of Nepalis in the Indian subcontinent and how it has played a crucial role in their identity construction. It traces the trajectory of the *basain sarai* spanning from the 19th to the 21st century. It shows how the *dukha* (sorrow), poverty resulting from the exploitative feudal system, the rigid caste hierarchy and the regressive moral codes of conduct under the Gorkha regime forced multitudes to leave their *muluk* (native land) for *Muglan* (land of the Mughals, British India). The *lahures* and *paltanes* (soldiers) formed the majority, the others included the tea and cinchona plantation workers, coolies, dairy farmers and graziers. Besides some seasonal workers, the rest of the workforce settled down in the places of their work, constructing identities and making claims of belonging to their host societies. Meanwhile the economic backwardness, underdevelopment, unemployment and the political turmoil in post-colonial Darjeeling pushed many educated but unemployed youths to Nepal, Sikkim and many other Indian cities for employment. With time, overseas migration of Indian Nepalis has increased considerably. Unlike their passive and 'economically inactive' predecessors, presently even Nepali women migrate for employment and/or education. The paper will make a close reading of Prajwal Parajuly's short stories, "The Cleft", "The Immigrants" and his novel *The Land Where I Flee* to bring out the harsh realities and the lived in realities of the *basain sarain*.

Keywords: *Basain Sarain, Migration, Identity, Lived in Realities*

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Displacement, both voluntary and involuntary has been an integral part of the life of Nepalis in the Indian subcontinent. *Basain sarai* or migration is voluntary where migrants leave their homes for better economic opportunities. *Basain sarai* has played a crucial role in the Indian Nepali identity construction and its ensuing identity crisis. The harsh socio-economic conditions of the early 19th century Gorkha kingdom in Nepal first compelled many to migrate to *Mughlan/Munglan* (the land of the Mughals, India). The early *basai sarai* was followed by waves of migration of a heterogeneous group of people from different castes, tribes and regions of Nepal over time and space. The lived-in experiences of the *basain sarai/s* and *nirvasan/s* of Nepalis across time and space have been an important theme of Nepali literature. Nepali poems, stories and songs are replete with stories of migration across time. This paper closely studies the implication of waves of migration over time and space on the identity crises of a people living in India but having close historical, cultural and linguistic ties with Nepal.

The *dukha* (sorrow), poverty resulting from the exploitative feudal system, the rigid caste hierarchy and the regressive moral codes of conduct under the 19th century Gorkha regime forced multitudes to leave their *muluk* (native land) for *Muglan* (land of the Mughlas, British India) where money seemed to grow in tea bushes (*chiya ko botma paisa phalcha*). The fact that *Muglan* or India was comparatively liberal and hence free from the oppressive socio-religious customs and practices of Nepal served as a potent pull factor for immigrants from Nepal. Nepal, then was under the repressive moral codes of the *Muluki Ain* (National Civil Code). It was introduced by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854 and incorporated the diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups of Nepal into a rigid Hindu *varna* or caste system (Chettri 78). The *Muluki Ain* legitimated practices of untouchability and serfdom. The hill tribes and the low Khas castes like the Kamis, Damais and Sarkis were subjected to oppression and exploitation by the high Khas castes like the Bahuns, Chettris and Thakuris.

Among the hordes who emigrated to British India, a good number were *lahures* and *paltanes* (soldiers). The term *Lahure* was derived from 'Lahore' -the place they were first enlisted to in Ranjit Singh's army and the latter presumably from 'platoon'. The *Gurkha* (British adaptation of 'Gorkha' in British military parlance) soldiers formed a majority of the Nepali emigrants among the tea and cinchona plantation workers, coolies, dairy farmers and graziers. With time, Nepalis were scattered over the breadth of British India spanning from the Garhwal hills in the west, across the Darjeeling hills, Dooars, and Assam, to the fringes of the British eastern province in Burma as well as the kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan.

Even after the Indian Independence in 1947, a large number of Nepalese were recruited by the Indian Army by virtue of the Britain-India-Nepal Tripartite Agreement, or the TPA. As a result of which, large number of Nepalese still serve in the Gorkha Regiment of the Indian army including other security wings of the Indian government (Sharma and Thapa 17). The Indian educational institutions also drew many students from Nepal. The migrants in the second phase were mostly from the 'poorest', the most infertile and remote places of Western Nepal who flocked to Indian cities like Delhi, Bombay, etc. Unlike the migrants of the first phase who permanently migrated to India in search of lands for cultivation and settlement, they were seasonal migrants "absenting themselves for six to eight months" in a year when agriculture was leaner every year. Chain migration was prevalent among them where people from a specific district migrate to one city. They provided cheap unskilled labour in construction sites and took up a varied range of jobs like that of *chowkidars* (door keepers), waiters, porters, masons, petty peddlers, cattle herders, farmhands, domestic helps, etc (Gellner 7-8).

Whereas in post-colonial India, the underdevelopment and abject poverty of the tea plantations in the Darjeeling hills and the Dooars region forced many individuals and families who depended on the tea gardens for sustenance to migrate to Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, the Northeast and the cities in search of jobs. Many women, children and even men were compelled to cross over to Nepal to work as servants, babysitters in the houses of the affluent Nepalese. Prajwal Parajuly's "The Cleft" (2013) depicts how poverty and the miserable life in the tea gardens urges the tea garden worker-parents of a nine-year-old Kaali to readily "offer" Kaali as a servant girl to Parvati "for free". With many more mouths to feed, the cleft-lipped and thus 'deformed' child was a huge burden to her parents so Kaali is sent off to Kathmandu to work for Parvati. Some educated yet unemployed youth from the Darjeeling hills also migrated to the

towns and cities of Nepal in search of jobs as the region was plagued by underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment in the post-independence period.

The government failed to generate opportunities for employment in the Darjeeling hills. The tea gardens managerial and other good posts were filled by Bengalis and Nepalis were still stuck with low paying, menial jobs. In comparison to their counterparts from Nepal the Nepalis in the Darjeeling hills had received a decent education owing to the establishment of schools and colleges by the missionaries. Indian Nepalis who migrated to Nepal were readily employed as teachers in schools, or even in offices. Many talented Indian Nepali musicians, singers, and actors moved to Nepal and made it big in the Nepalese music and film industry. Zealous and mission-minded Christian youths from the Darjeeling hills also migrated to the Hindu kingdom of Nepal to evangelise and plant churches in Nepal.

India and Nepal have also encountered many challenges because of the open Indo Nepalese border. One of the major problems posed by the unhindered and unchecked movement of Indian and Nepalese nationals across the border is the evil of trafficking. It is believed that every year some 15,000 Nepali women, girls and children are taken to India against their will (Thapa "Taken for Granted"¹⁴). Many women and children and even men from various villages and towns of Nepal have been trafficked to Indian brothels, circuses, etc. The easily accessible India-Nepal border also facilitated the free movement of trafficking agents who lured and duped poor and innocent women, children and even men from Nepal to Indian towns and cities like Siliguri, Bombay, Delhi, etc. For instance, Kaali in "The Cleft" (2012) is instigated to flee her mistress' house in Kathmandu and join the film industry in Bombay after a surgery on her cleft lip. "The Maoists have destroyed Nepal, he said. Even if you escape the clutches of your cruel mistress one day, what will you do in this country? ...It's time for you to leave the country and make a life for yourself, Kaali. The rich go to America, to England. You will go to Bombay and become the biggest star in Bollywood (Parajuly 30) Many poor, innocent and gullible Nepali women are lured to cities like Mumbai and Delhi with prospects of high-paying jobs, joining Bollywood or of marriage. There has been a significant rise in the trafficking of Nepalese girls and women to Indian cities in the recent times in the aftermath of Maoist insurgency and the devastating earthquake in Nepal in April 2015. Whereas many poor and vulnerable Nepalese were lured to Indian metropolitan cities and made part of organ donation scams. Traffickers take advantage of the fact that official documents of individuals crossing the border is not maintained as individuals can freely cross the border without having to produce any documents for identification.

Miscreants from both the nations misused the open border and used it as a freeway for smuggling of arms, drugs and money. The open border was also of great benefit to political escapees who fled their country and sought refuge on the other side of the border. The open border, non-requirement of official documents, and minimal cost of migration pulled and still pulls many Nepalese to seek jobs across major cities in India. The Nepalese in India and the Indians in Nepal were on the receiving end and were greatly benefitted by the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Citizens of Nepal and India freely bought land, constructed houses and engaged in trade and business on the other side.

Post-colonial Darjeeling witnessed very little or no change in the administrative and economic structures. Discrimination and economic deterioration persisted in Darjeeling in the

form of internal neocolonialism perpetrated by the Government of West Bengal. The Government of West Bengal ushered in very little or no changes in the administrative or economic structure of Darjeeling. The tea estates which were once owned by European planters were owned by Bengalis, Marwaris or by big corporate from other parts of India. Meager wage paying manual labour and tea picking jobs were limited to Nepali men and women. Only a very few locals held higher positions in the tea estates. The tea gardens had turned into sites of underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. The stagnation in the development of agriculture further led to the economic deterioration of the region.

The Tourism industry in the Darjeeling hills began to thrive with the establishment of the West Bengal Tourist Development Corporation (WBTDC) in 1975. But wealthy outsiders owned a majority of hotels and transport companies which were only managed by locals. The locals were involved only in petty things like the sale of souvenirs and local agricultural produce, photography, driving etc. The major stakeholders in the industry were the outsiders (Subba 49). Trade and commerce in the region too were completely dominated by outsiders-the Marwaris and Biharis. There was very little or no scope for locals in the sphere of trade and commerce except for petty ones. The Marwaris and Biharis held a monopoly over the best businesses in town, and the locals were left selling vegetables and fruits. Despite their numerical strength the locals found themselves being economically exploited by the outsiders. The educated Indian Nepali youths of the Darjeeling hills too found little or no employment opportunities as the bigger and better share of government jobs was taken over by the Bengalis. This compelled people in pursuit of jobs and better lives to move to Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, the Northeastern states and the Indian metropolitan cities from the world-famous tea gardens of the Darjeeling hills that had drawn their forefathers to it about two centuries ago. For the young, able-bodied, adventurous, semi-literate Nepali men from India as well as Nepal, the decent salary, facilities and the glory of military and paramilitary services caught their fancy. Many thronged to the recruiting centers and got themselves enrolled in large numbers, hassle-free.

The small Indian towns where the Nepali population was concentrated provided very few avenues and platforms for youngsters passionate about sports, music and films to hone and showcase their talents. With the advent of televisions in small towns even if not to each one of the houses, young people were exposed to the world of films, television serials, sports and music and they began harboring dreams of moving to big cities to fulfill their dreams. A good number of educated second and third generation Indian Nepalis migrated to cities like Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, etc. in order to carve a niche for themselves in the field of music, sports, films, journalism, etc. rather than getting enlisted in the Indian Army or working as labourers and tea coolies like their forefathers.

Prajwal Parajuly's debut novel, *The Land Where I Flee* (2013), portrays the lives of homosexuals and transgenders. The novel depicts how social prejudices and lack of social acceptance, homophobia have driven homosexuals and transgenders from their wee hometowns in the Darjeeling hills to the cities in pursuit of freedom and a dignified life. The fear of 'coming out' and expressing his true identity to Aama the conservative matriarch of the Neupaney family, Agastya chooses to settle in New York and never return to Gangtok. Prasanti the domestic help of the Neupaney family, a trans woman was born as Prasant. He flees from his home in Kalimpong immediately after his father's death fearing he would be made a Pundit as the only son of an Upadhyay Bahun according to his family's Bahun customs and traditions. His

desire to lead a dignified life and protect his family from being tarnished and condemned leads him to Mumbai where he takes refuge in a *hijra* house. After a gender reassignment surgery in Bangalore, Prasant becomes Prashanti and goes to Gangtok instead of returning home to Kalimpong.

Besides migrating to cities for employment many from middle-class Nepali families were sent to cities for higher education. With the establishment of call centers in cities in the early 2000s a good number of educated Nepali youths were recruited. The uneducated or those schooled till the primary or middle school level worked as domestic help, security guards, ayahs, salespersons, waiters in restaurants and especially young Nepali women as assistants in beauty parlours. Many ex- servicemen were also recruited as security personnel in shopping malls, banks, complexes and apartments after their retirement from the army. Some earned their living by running small eateries selling momos and other traditional food items. As more and more Nepalis migrated out from their Nepali majoritarian hometowns, they experienced hostility, intolerance from other Indian communities and were deeply hurt and humiliated. Even in Sikkim, the Nepalis who had migrated to Sikkim from the Darjeeling district and the Doars region were looked down upon with hostility as 'others', 'outsiders' and therefore competitors in their race for jobs, resources and land in Sikkim. Many ignorant fellow Indians considered them to be foreigners or citizens of Nepal. To the mainstream Indians, Nepalis were stereotyped as '*bahadurs*' or '*durwans*'. The second and third-generation Indian Nepalis, with their exposure to mainstream India and its attitude towards them, began to suffer from a deep identity crisis which their forefathers had not experienced.

The 21st century migration of Nepalis (both from India as well as Nepal) involves migration overseas for employment or education. For Nepali migrants, India had been a major destination for employment for almost two centuries. However, since the last few decades, the migration of the Nepalese to India has decreased. Nepalis are seeking employment opportunities abroad because of the considerably higher wages and the glitz and glamour of working in the *bidesh* (foreign country). Many Nepalis have been lured to the U.S. and countries like Hongkong, Singapore, Dubai, Kuwait, Oman, Israel, etc. With the Nepali ex-British Army and their families settling down in places in the U.K., the number of Nepalis in the U.K. has been increasing. Due to the geographical proximity of India, the low travel costs to India still draws Nepalese migrants who cannot afford to go overseas. A shift in the nature of the immigrants of recent times comprise of educated people, professionals and students in pursuit of professional employment or higher education in foreign countries though the majority remain unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The fictional works of Prajwal Parajuly, the internationally acclaimed Indian Nepali diasporic writer portray the injustice, indignity meted out on Nepalis in the host nations. Parajuly's *The Land Where I Flee* (2016) and "The Immigrants" demystify the life of Nepalis living abroad and bring out the harsh realities of their life in the *bidesh*.

In Prajwal Parajuly's *The Land Where I Flee* (2013), the Neupaney siblings who hailed from the wealthy and influential Neupaney family of Gangtok had all settled abroad. The eldest, Agastya, was a soon-to-be green card holder oncologist in New York. The migration of Nepalese women was negligible in the past, it was the men who migrated and women were mere dependents, they stayed at home and took care of the home and children. A few decades ago, women were passive agents of migration, and their migration was because of their marriage or family migration. The two Neupaney sisters Bhagwati and Manasa too were 'passive agents of

migration' and settled in Colorado and London by virtue of their marriage. Bhagwati and her family had landed in America as part of the Lhotshampa rehabilitation project of America after being 'herded out of Bhutan'. The Oxford-educated Manasa was settled in London after she became the daughter-in-law of a moneyed Nepalese family in London. Ironically, Bhagwati, the least educated among the siblings, washed dishes at a diner to make ends meet for her family but the intelligent and Oxford-educated Manasa was 'economically inactive' as she was busy taking care of her invalid father-in-law.

In recent times, many Nepali women are immigrating to foreign countries in search of jobs though their numbers are lesser than their male counterparts. Most women migrants are school-level dropouts however some among them are college educated. Many work as housemaids, caregivers, cleaners, salespersons etc. Some are also employed in the hospitality sector in hotels and restaurants, and a very small percentage of Nepali women work as nurses and other professionals such as salespersons, and cashiers, as well as in the manufacturing of electronics, textiles, food processing, construction and transportation sector (Limbu 128). As a majority of Nepali women migrants are employed in the domestic sector as housemaids, caretakers of children and the elderly this has led to Nepalis being stereotyped as suitable servants. Sabitri a young Nepalese woman from Rolpa in Parajuly's "The Immigrants" (2013) worked as a *kaam garne* (servant) in America and eventually ended up working for Amit a Nepali from Darjeeling. Sabitri cooks for Amit in exchange for English lessons from Amit. Sabitri denies being paid in cash by a fellow Nepali "It's one Nepali helping another. I cook your food; you teach me English. Problem solved. Let's not be petty" (Parajuly 254). Though both spoke the same language, shared the same culture and values and ate the same food, in terms of their socio-economic status they were worlds apart. Amit was Sabitri's employer, richer, worked in a company, owned a tiny apartment in Manhattan and even had achieved "a brown man's biggest aspiration", a German maid before Sabitri. At twenty-five he was proud that he had climbed up the 'ladder of success' in America with 'zero help' from his parents. Unlike Amit, Sabitri felt she was moving towards the 'worse' instead of 'moving' towards 'better things' "Better things? I am wiping shit of Madam's grandchildren. This is not better things" (271).

The reason that motivated their immigration to America was different, for Sabitri, it was purely a compulsion to financially support her family whereas for Amit it was his desire for a better life, the glitz and glamour of America and the prestige of working in America. Sabitri's sole ambition was to earn lots of money and to own a clothes store of her own. Right from the first month of her stay in America, Sabitri had started sending money home to repay the loan her family had taken for her travel and rent for the first month. For Amit whose parents were Lecturers in a reputed college in Darjeeling, it had never occurred to him, even in his wildest dreams that a person would have to take a loan to go to America. Unlike Sabitri, he had little or no familial responsibilities and financial constraints as he came from a relatively well to do family. Little did Sabitri's family know that she shared a one bed- room apartment with seven people so that she could save some more money and send it home for the construction of a new 'cement house' in Illam.

At home, everyone thought that Sabitri worked in an office "But I am working as a *kaam garne* here. No one in the family knows it...They think I am working in an office. And no one knows about the seven people who are my roommates. Three are men. Almost all of them are illegal (256). But Sabitri was lucky, she had won the most coveted Diversity Visa lottery which

meant that Sabitri was a lawful citizen of America per say but this category of American citizens was resented as much as refugees and expatriates in America. While professionals like Amit and also Agastya belonged to the category who comprised of “professionals-diligent graduates from American Universities, working harder still to climb the immigrant ladder one visa status at a time...” and “maintained a safe distance from” Diversity Visa holders like Sabitri and Bhagwati who had received citizenship by luck or on humanitarian grounds “in no small part by a mixture of scorn and envy (Parajuly 22). When Amit’s application for the H-1B Visa gets rejected, Amit is compelled to accept Sabitri’s proposition. “I am a citizen of America. You need to stay in the country legally. You can marry me. It won’t be real. No one has to know... And after marry, you can continue your job. We can get divorce in no time (278-79). Amit’s decision portrays how youths from countries like India, Nepal, blinded by their American dreams deliberately embrace desperate measures to make a living in America.

The history of Nepalis in India is steeped in stories of migration. It began with the migration of Gurkha soldiers, tea plantation workers and labourers in the 19th century even before the demarcation of national territories and boundaries of India and Nepal by the British colonizers. The *dukha* caused by the socio-political and economic of nineteenth century prompted Nepalis to migrate to *Muglan/ Mungalan/ Mughlan*, British India the land of plentitude. The open Indo-Nepal border still facilitates migration between the two nations though the migration is mostly uni-directional. The geographical proximity has made India a major destination for Nepali workers. For the Indian Nepalis, migration to the cities or overseas for jobs and economic benefits still forms an integral part of reality today.

Bipul Chettri a renowned Indian Nepali singer and songwriter in his recent song “Mughlan” narrates the agonizing lived experience of Nepali migration that cuts across nationality (Nepalese/Indian Nepali), ethnicity, gender, class, space and generations. It captures the *byatha* (pain, suffering) of a helpless *Kancha Dai* –a Nepali Everyman, who is compelled to leave home for Mughlan (also Muglan, Mungalan) in search of a better life. “*Yestai cha yo katha Kancha Dai ko byatha*, this is how the story of the misery of Kancha Dai unfolds / *Juni Juni dekhi yestai nai awastha* Such has been the plight for generations (Chettri 4:09). The character, Kancha Dai is not bound by gender, space and time and represents the entire Nepali speaking community irrespective of citizenship whether Indian or Nepalese who have been forced to leave their ‘*desh*’ and migrate to ‘*bidesh*’, ‘*pardes*’ whether in the past or the recent past for their economic wellbeing. Mughlan too, is not restricted to the nineteenth century, prosperous land of Mughals where money grew in tea bushes but any country overseas or any place away from home where Nepali men and women migrate to work and live permanently or temporarily. “*Jiwna yaha garo bho* (Life here is arduous) *Kaam gari khana sahro bho* It is difficult to earn a living here... *Bhagya raicha yestai hamro* What a deplorable fate we have (Chettri 0:35). The song ponders at the wretched fate of Nepalis that causes them to choose from two equally difficult choices of leaving home and estranging oneself from one’s *muluk* and the warmth of being with loved ones to a distant land with aspirations for economic prosperity and a better life or staying back to a life of poverty, injustice and caste oppression. The brighter side of *Muglan* was the freedom it offered – freedom from the rigid caste hierarchy, freedom to climb up the social ladder on the basis of one’s ability, labour and also financial freedom from the back-breaking burden of debts. The deep sense of rootlessness and nostalgia which is aggravated by non-acceptance in the host society/country also finds expression in the song. “*Bidesh ta gayeni aafno thaw bhane afnai raichani* I went to a foreign land and realized that there is no place like one’s own (2:58). But the decision

to return was an equally difficult one. “*Farkana ta mann lagcha, desh ko haal sochi darl agcha* I long to return, but shudder at the state of my country) ...*farki ke garu bhani darlagcha* (I despair at what I will do on returning (3:32). Migrants hesitated to return to the hard life fraught with poverty, violence and strife back at home. Chettri’s “Mughlan” presents the psychological reality of migration and hence strikes a chord with the entire Nepali community for whom the phenomenon of migration forms an integral part of their history and reality.

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