

**MAPPING MY
GRANDMOTHERS'
FOOTPRINTS: GENDERING
MIGRATION IN THE
EASTERN HIMALAYAS**

—

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INTRODUCTION

Sarki Lhamu was described as the fiercest woman of the family, who, even with her asthmatic voice, could shout from her window, inviting guests for tea as they walked past the road in front of her home. Jhangchub Lhamo, on the other hand, was described as a woman of discipline. She got up every morning at 5 AM, washed her hair, and always prepared tea and food to welcome anyone into her small home. Many recall her cooking *tingmo* (Tibetan steamed buns) with tea and offering them to her guests, who often visited her tiny home on their way home from work in town. Sarki retired due to old age and health problems after having established and run a business for several years and finally letting her asthmatic condition slow her down, ultimately making her take her health seriously. She was cared for by her children, who lived in Darjeeling. Jhangchub, on the other hand, grew old with

her husband, a former member of the *Chushi Gangdruk*, a Tibetan armed resistance group, who often left for Dharamshala for months. One of her daughters left for Japan to support her family, while her other daughter stayed back to care for her ageing parents.

Sarki and Jhangchub are my paternal and maternal grandmothers, respectively, whose stories of migration from Nepal and Tibet were told to us when we were growing up. As children, we would be told the same stories from different perspectives, some from my grandfathers' points of view, some from my parents', and also some from my uncles' and aunts'. They have a fragmented picture of these women's lives—where they were from, and how they migrated—except for certain facts, like who these two women migrated with, which are the focus of most of the personal narratives shared during dinner conversations. This essay, therefore, uses Jhangchub and Sarki's life stories as an entry into the history of migration. I also interviewed two women, Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo,¹ who were of a similar age group and from the same regions in Nepal and Tibet, and retraced their journey of migration from their pre-migration choices to their post-migration journeys as women, one of whom came in as a refugee and the other as an economic migrant from Nepal. Their journeys were very different from those of Sarki and Jhangchub, but there are also parallels that I hope to draw that describe to us how gender affects migration in the Eastern Himalayas and how all four of them, as migrants, overcame the hurdles by taking on economic roles to support their families.

Tenzing Lhamo slowly laughed, chuckling while sharing her nascent experience in India as a teenager. 'I had never seen a banana back home in Tibet.' This comment revealed the climatic differences between her home in Tibet and where she migrated to in India. After the occupation of the Tibetan state by the Chinese government, Tibetans sought refuge in India, fleeing their homes in Tibet and aspiring for a better life away from their natal homes. The most recent census by UNHCR India shows that as of January 2023, 72,291 Tibetan refugees currently reside in India. India has been a host country for Tibetans since 1959, also hosting the Tibetan government

in exile for more than six decades. India and Tibet have had a shared historical connection due to their shared philosophies and religious past. The two nations shared Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy, which was also a reason Tibetans migrated to India (Dolma 2019).

'We never feared when travelling to India, be it day or night. I have never been one to be scared of both the known and the unknown,' Ang Mingma shares with a stern face, her ponytail bobbing in the air, referring to her journey of migration from Nepal to India. According to the Nepal Census of 2001, it was estimated that there are approximately 0.5 million Nepalese migrant workers in India, but the figures vary from approximately 8 million according to the Indian government (Ministry of External Affairs 2022), with 'unofficial estimates [...] ranging from a high of 3 million to 1.4 million to a very precise 892,312' (Sharma and Thapa 2013, p. 6). It has been difficult to ascertain an exact number of migrants because of the porous borders between India and Nepal.

This essay looks at gendered migration in the Eastern Himalayan region through the eyes of two women whose paths closely resemble my grandmothers'. The larger aim of this essay is to examine Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's reasons for migrating. In this work, I examine the pre-migratory decisions and anxieties, and the post-migration realities of migrants' lives through interviews with Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo, but also by engaging with the personal histories of the four women as I examine the discourses and literature on migration, that has mostly been male-centric. Women's migration has therefore been viewed as secondary, i.e., the result of male outmigration from towns and villages, and it has often been seen 'as a consequence of male migration, wherein in contemporary times, this perception is being challenged as more women migrate' (Singh 2018). Women's migration, however, is not always secondary, especially in the case of Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo, and Sarki Lhamu and Jhangchub Lhamo; the stories of Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo challenge this very singular narrative as I employ the personal history of my grandmother's Jhangchub Wangmo and Sarki Lhamo, which

has a similar trajectory to their lives as migrant women in the Eastern Himalayan region. This essay also aims to document a history of migration through personal histories, archiving the stories of women who chose to migrate alongside those who were forced to migrate due to their social and political contexts.

My personal history is intertwined with the history of two migrations that happened across different borders. One where Jhangchub Lhamo, my maternal grandmother, migrated from Tibet in search of her parents and was stopped by the Chinese military twice during her attempts to flee, and another where Sarki Lhamu migrated from Nepal with her elder sister for better life. These personal histories of migration, therefore, allowed me to engage with questions of gender and migration in the Eastern Himalayas in general and Darjeeling specifically. The life stories of Tenzing Lhamo and Ang Mingma are witnesses to how 'the decision to migrate and the post-migration experience with gendered systems of inequality in households, labour markets, and cultures' (Morokvašić 1984 as cited in Nawyn 2010). On the other hand, my paternal grandmother migrated to Darjeeling from Nepal, naively accompanying her elder sister. She had little knowledge of where she was headed, only knowing that what they were doing was for better living conditions. Here, I position myself as: a researcher from the Eastern Himalayas and an individual whose personal history has been shaped by the region, and also as a woman whose identity has been shaped by histories of migration from Tibet and Nepal, wherein my positionality as an individual with a mixed heritage has allowed me to understand both forced migration as well as economic migration.

Through this essay, I hope to describe migration narratives in the Eastern Himalayan region, originating in Nepal and Tibet. Darjeeling is a hill town of migrants; the history of the town is intricately woven around multiple stories of migration as it borders three nation-states, i.e., Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, that allows the ease of cross-border migrations. As stated earlier, migration interacts with gendered aspects of inequality in a significant way. This is true of the two personal

histories I'm studying and of the more recent case of the Rohingya Muslim women who 'negotiated practices of survival and coping' when fleeing to India (Field, Pandit and Rajdev 2021). At the same time, post-migration to another country affects people as has been shown by Field et al., in the case of Rohingya women, wherein the gendered experiences of violence and displacements makes them take lead during forced migration out of Myanmar (ibid.). This essay also documents and analyses the pre-migratory experiences of Tenzing Lhamo and Ang Mingma before they undertook their arduous journeys through hills and valleys, rocky terrains, and rivers. It is also crucial to document the narratives of women while they can still remember those experiences, as the details and memories of the past slowly wane with time. The Himalayas are callous at times, and despite the changing temperatures and the chilling forests, these two women, accompanied by either friends or kin, did not give up until they reached their destinations, undeterred by their grueling journeys.

CONTEXTUALISING THE HISTORY OF MIGRATION (1960–1965)

Migration in South Asia is entrenched in a patriarchal culture, with the assumption that most migration happens as a result of male migration away from families, along with conflict-related displacement, development-related displacement, the decline of agriculture, the erosion of natural resources, and natural disasters (Singh 2018). It is, therefore, crucial to undertake research such as this that focuses on gendering migration and examining how gendered experiences affect individual's migration across nation-state boundaries. Literature on cross-border migration in the Eastern Himalayan region has been scarce, but there is a steady growth in scholars from the region studying this movement. I hope to address and contribute towards the growing scholarship on the historical narratives of women's migration

and the gendered aspects of migration while relocating and settling in; wherein the pre-migration experiences as well as the journey of women from these nation-states are being centred through women's voices in the Eastern Himalayan region. Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's stories allow us to look at migration in a nuanced manner. How do these migrations reveal the nature of the social-political contexts they migrate from, and do they also tell us about those social contexts? This allows us to historically contextualise the backgrounds of the four migration narratives centred in this essay, covering migrations across the Indian border from both Nepal and Tibet.

India and Nepal have had historical ties first laid by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1815 between colonial India and Nepal and subsequently in 1950, which formed the bedrock of the unique relations that exist between India and Nepal (Pradhan 2022), which also led to frequent migration due to the open-border policies. Women have migrated from Nepal and Tibet because of many reasons, but mostly arising from their socio-political development of their own home countries. Rai (2021) notes that in the past, international migrants were predominantly men due to various socio-cultural and structural reasons, and women were "passive" migrants and moved due to associational relations like marriage. The migration from Nepal to India has a long history, wherein transhumance and trans-himalayan trade can be traced to 500 BC, while the first instances of documented migration occurred post the formation of Nepal in 1768-1769. Nepalese citizens were recruited in the armies of Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh Empire in the early nineteenth century (Sharma and Thapa 2013). Later, the British enlisted the first Nepalese citizens in their army, informally recruiting them in 1853, wherein later Gurkha battalions were reorganised on a permanent basis in 1861 (Tiway 2009, 802–805). Interestingly, soldiers from Nepal were recruited by a variety of regiments, but they were primarily identified with Gurkha regiments (*ibid.*). Indo-Nepal ties are some of the friendliest in the region, strengthened by the countries' religious and cultural similarities. The 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship has

been the bedrock that has nourished friendly relations, along with the porous borders between India and Nepal. Nepal shares a long border of approximately 1,850 kilometres with India, of which one tenth runs along the Eastern Himalayan region, specifically the state of Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills (Embassy of India in Kathmandu). While the open border has allowed economic and social exchange between the two countries, it also makes it difficult to collect accurate migration data due to the ease of migration for reasons ranging from seasonal work to cross-border marriages. It is through this context that one can understand the background of Sarki Lhamu's and Ang Mingma's transnational migration from Nepal to India.

On the other hand, Indo-Tibetan relations have often affected Sino-Indian relations; this can be seen in instances wherein the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, visited areas of India claimed by China, like Arunachal Pradesh, and earned the ire of the Chinese government (Press Trust of India 2024). Sino-Indian relations have moved from friendly during the Panchsheel Agreement between India and China to aggressive in the next five years, in 1959, which related to events in Tibet (Lüthi 2012). When Beijing and Delhi signed the 'Agreement between India and China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of India and China' in 1954, India had given its sanction for Chinese control over Tibet; however, there was disagreement between the Tibetan-Indian border, and through a series of events brimming in Lhasa and East Tibet that led to the Tibetan Uprising in 1959. Post-independence, India has attempted to build Sino-Indian relations but has failed due to existing border issues between the two nations in the Himalayas, wherein China claims many of the border areas under Indian control as their own. After the mass exodus of Tibetans from Tibet that followed the Uprising of 1959, one of the major reasons for migrations was the fear of political and cultural persecution in Tibet, while also following the 14th Dalai Lama to India in exile, and memory that Tibetans often share in the diaspora (Frilund 2020). Tibetan refugees are not only represented by the monastic clergy, the upper class, and active participants in the

Tibetan resistance movement, but also by many farmers and traders who escaped to India from Tibetan border towns. The first wave of migration from Tibet did not represent the demographics of Tibetan society. Tenzing Lhamo's story is a testament to the many other voices of women, such as the voices of the ordinary Tibetan, who did not realise the significance of migration for herself. Tenzing's perspective is that of a migrant who left her hometown without knowing the impact on the community by her departure, unlike Jhangchub Lhamo, who recognised the changes in her small hometown of Phari in U-tsang province, wherein the Chinese occupation looked different for her, as she faced imprisonment and witnessed many of her family members leaving the town.

Scholarship on gendered migration in the Eastern Himalayas has been scarce. Hence, it is crucial to look at the various aspects of migration, but foremost, to give precedence to women's voices, as they not only allow us to look at histories differently but also challenge the established theories that have been constructed. The emphasis of this paper, therefore, is on personal history, because of 'its use [in] mov[ing] towards a more nuanced, multi-stranded understanding of society and a greater recognition of the heterogeneity of human lives and lived experience, even under overarching systems of patriarchy and colonialism' (Arnold and Blackburn 2004). Although Tibetan women were not subjected to stringent patriarchal cultural norms, they were treated as inferior to their male counterparts. An example of this is Chotsho's (1997, p. 64) description of how women were humiliated by having to give birth in the dirtiest of rooms. Approaching this subject through personal histories is a means of breaking the silences imposed by society and history, whose stories are not necessarily accessible by other means, where their individual voices contain underlying subversive messages (Arnold and Blackburn 2004). The life stories of migration from Nepal and Tibet to India women traverse generations by trying to remember their childhood, their youth and now their old age. As they narrate their stories from memory, thinking

hard, remembering, forgetting and omitting many of their experiences as women.

One's positionality might influence one's understanding and interpretation of these stories; there is also the likelihood of fixating on stories of wonder and courage. It is crucial to have women's stories where their journey as migrants to a different land is also grounded in stories of friendship and kinship. Economic migrants can often have kin who may have established themselves in the country that the individual is migrating to. Nevertheless, refugees who migrate due to political unrest seldom have kin in a foreign land; the host country that refugees migrate to is not a personal choice. They rely on their government, the host country's benevolence, and camaraderie from members of their community, who support them through difficult times. Only a few years after they migrated to India, Tenzing Lhamo and Ang Mingma found partners and started families, and they finally settled in Darjeeling despite the hardships and turmoils of striving to find a living, and also imagined a life for their own in a new country. Overcoming language barriers was a tough challenge for both of them, but for Ang Mingma, the Nepali language spoken in Darjeeling was still familiar to her ear when she arrived in the Darjeeling Hills. However, Tenzing Lhamo's experiences as a political refugee in India depended entirely on her uncle and the translators she was travelling with, the latter who helped them with Hindi while they navigated their way to Dharmshala in 1959. These stories bear witness to how gender and migration are intertwined. Their life stories are layered with aspirations, loss, and longing for family, while also finding a place to call home in a country far away.

JOURNEY TOWARDS MUGLAN – OF HOPES AND DREAMS

Sarki Lhamu was born in a small village in the Solukhumbu district of Nepal. Her father was a head monk in the local monastery, and her family was respected by all. This is one version of the story that

has been passed down to us over generations. As the family tale goes, Sarki's mother had just given birth to a young boy who died before he could even properly walk. When Sarki was born, the family rejoiced at the birth of another child, but her mother was scared that she might meet the same fate as her brother and asked for names suitable for the newborn. Elders in the family suggested giving her a name that would ward off the evil eye and bless the child's good health. She was then named Sarki after one of the Hill Dalit communities; we were told that among her community, it was common to name a child with a caste name, specifically from the Nepali Dalit community, wherein giving their children a Dalit caste name was meant to ward off the evil eye.

Sarki Lhamu was a strong-witted and sharp child, but despite her father being a monk and literate, Sarki never went to school. As a teenager, she had an irritable temperament and aspirations of living a better life outside the countryside. Unfortunately, very few details of her migration are known in the family; she was a woman whose early life remains unclear. Fragments of this story were shared by Sarki with the rest of the family, fragments relating to her migration to India as a young teenager. She was said to be around the age of 14 when she left her home and her family in Solukhumbu. Sarki and her elder sister Dawa decided to head towards *Muglan*, loosely used to refer to India—*Muglan* is also used to refer to a foreign country more generally, but in the case of India, it means the 'land defiled by the Mughals' (Chettri 2017). Despite the journey being long and taxing on the body, Sarki is often said to have described the journey as play for her. Sarki and her sister then took on odd jobs in Darjeeling to make ends meet. Her elder sister eventually married in Darjeeling, and for young Sarki, building her own life and family became one of her ambitions. After a few more years, she finally started a family of her own, and at the time lived in B-building in the heart of Darjeeling, which was also home to other migrant families like hers. There, she started selling alcohol and food to make extra money for the family. Sarki, with her raspy voice, often wistfully shared that if her business partner had not cheated her, she would have owned several breweries in Sikkim.

Mapping Sarki Lhamu's story also meant uncovering truths about how she and her sister migrated and resettled in India. Unfortunately, this project was almost twenty years too late to ask Sarki Lhamu about her journey to *Muglan*, specifically Darjeeling, as she breathed her last in Planters' Hospital with her family after an episode of a painful asthmatic attack in 2004. My grandmother's story of migrating from Nepal as a young teenager with her elder sister drew me to retracing how women from Nepal, particularly those who belonged to ethnic Himalayan groups in Nepal, migrated. Migration stories of women have been scarcely documented; with each passing generation, we lose stories and inadvertently lose the stories of women who migrated and created the communities we now call home.

I sat down with my parents as I made a list of women who have been family friends or family and mapped the age that would resemble Sarki Lhamu's, reaching out to those who were in Darjeeling, some hesitant to share their stories and some not in town. As a part of this endeavour to understand gendered migration in the Eastern Himalayas, Ang Mingma finally agreed to share her life story. Ang Mingma is basking in the warm evening sun of Chowrasta, sitting with a group of older women on green benches towards Mall Road after their evening walk. Ang Mingma looks young for her age as she springs up to me and begins talking about her quotidian life. She had already completed two rounds of her ritual evening walk and had been waiting for me. She said, 'Most of my friends are Tibetans and Sherpas; we have known each other for decades.' She also implied that it is easier to bond with women when they follow similar customs and religious practices. Ang Mingma's life story might resemble the life stories of several other women migrating from the mountainous regions of Nepal and Tibet. For many, the motive for migration and the larger context in which the migration took place would be similar. The journey itself remains perilous, and the decision to migrate or not alters the course of their lives, be it for better or for worse.

Ang Mingma was born in Khumjung village in Pasang Lhamo district, located near Namche Bazaar, which has grown popular in the

last five decades with the rise in expeditions to Mount Everest. Ang Mingma came to Darjeeling with three friends. Fed up with working in the fields and looking after livestock, they decided to run away. People who visited her village from Darjeeling used to show off their gold necklaces and chains, rings and earrings; seeing this, they thought they could recreate a similar life for themselves, away from the laborious toiling under the bright Himalayan sun. As Chettri notes, during the nineteenth century, the establishment of tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam by the British and ‘stories of “*chiyako botma paisa phalcha*” (money grows on tea bushes) further incentivised potential migrants to choose to travel eastwards to Darjeeling’ (Chettri 2017, p. 42) They grew potatoes, round radishes, *phapar* or *jow* (barley), and also foraged in the forests nearby.

Ang Mingma was 18 years old when she came to Darjeeling, the eldest daughter of the family. At that point in time, she lived with her grandparents, five aunts, and four brothers. She lost her mother at the age of eight, and her father had left when she was very young; he had headed out to make a living in Darjeeling and never returned. No one knows what happened to him or whether or not he is still alive. Ang Pasang, Lhakpa Bhuti, Pema Diki, and Ang Mingma formed a group of four. All of them, as she described, were fed up with the humdrum life in Khumjung and decided to leave for Darjeeling. And while ‘Lhakpa and Pema both returned to Nepal, I chose to stay back.’ Ang Mingma recounts how the journey to Darjeeling and the thought of leaving Khumjung left them excited, as it gave them a chance to take on an adventure on their own, but also carried with it the hope and aspirations of a different life, and maybe even a better life than what she had lived so far. She knew of her aunt Dawa Lhamo, a distant relative of her father who lived in Toong Soong, Darjeeling, and she knew she had a place to stay if she ever came to Darjeeling.

These four women carried *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) to eat on their way, and *cheura* (flattened rice). The four friends walked from Khumjung without their family’s knowledge. They packed enough food to last until they reached Darjeeling. They rested at Tumbuk,

then Okhaldunga, and reached Jainagar after two days. They then took a train from Jainagar to Siliguri, and traveled by bus to Darjeeling. They had a little money left, and exchanged it for Indian currency at Jainagar. The group of four women finally reached Darjeeling after five days, but the journey was only the beginning of a new life. Ang Mingma then searched for her aunt Ani Dawa Lhamo, whom she knew stayed in Toong Soong, Darjeeling. She finally met her aunt and stayed with her for two long years, after which, at the age of 20, she started working as a helper in the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), Darjeeling.

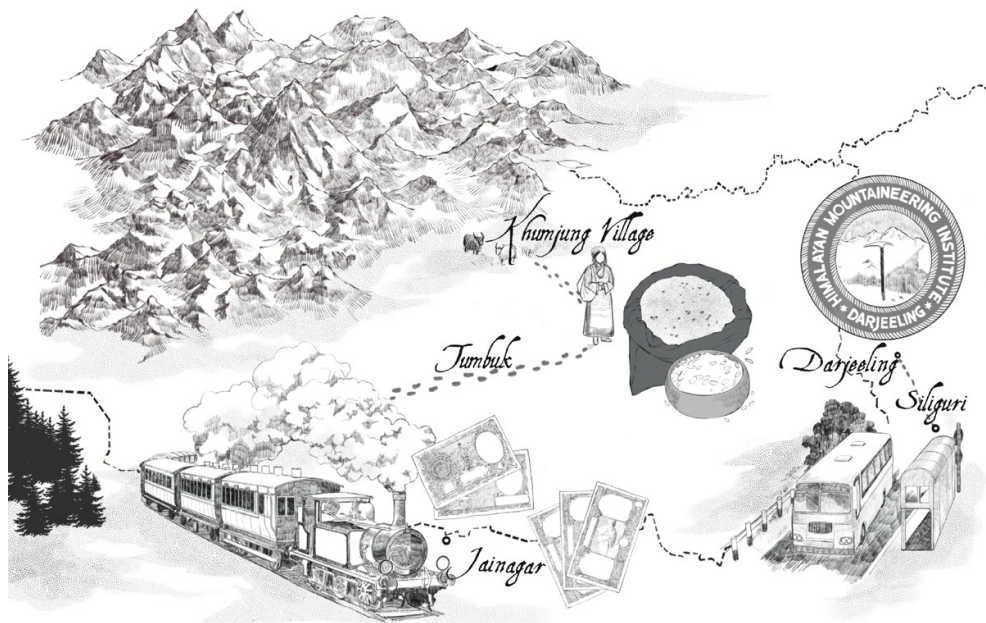
In present times, cars accompany the trekkers in their courses and expeditions, but early on, people had to carry the supplies used for cooking along with certain gear for the trekkers in HMI. This was her first job; at that time, most of the people from the Sherpa community worked in the capacity of coolies for the trekkers and their staff, who accompanied the trekkers to cook their meals, and hence she was enrolled as well in HMI for her initial job. They were given a meagre salary of ₹80 per day for the 22-day-long course. She worked in HMI for more than six years and travelled quite a bit, mainly in Sikkim, several times to areas near Sandakhphu, and to Bomdilla in Arunachal Pradesh as well. She used to take tourists and carry their loads for them. Ang Mingma was only able to connect with her family through letters; the three friends who had accompanied her had also stayed on in Darjeeling with their cousins. She does not describe their return to Nepal in much detail; through her little gestures, it seemed that one of the reasons for this was their inability to get the work and the life they had imagined in Darjeeling.

She eventually married a Sherpa man, whom she met during her days at HMI, doing what she describes as '*support janda-janda*' (going for support), which is to say that while on HMI treks and expeditions as supporting staff, she met and fell in love with her husband. After meeting her husband, she worked for some time and then left her work at HMI after marriage. Her husband had also run away from home in Khumbu. When her firstborn son reached the age of eight months,

she started selling woolen-knit sweaters near the Bellevue Hotel in Darjeeling. She left work at this shop around two years before we met, and was now enjoying her retired life at the age of 75. It is her daughter-in-law who now manages the shop.

Ang Mingma's life has shown us the ups and downs of migration, as she went in search of her aunt, with whom she would then stay. Those who visited her hometown after working in Darjeeling shaped her idea of the place. As a young child, she started yearning and aspiring for a good life in this distant land seen through the eyes of the women she grew up watching—women adorned with heavy jewellery and fancy clothes. Her idea of Muglan was shaped by these women's lifestyles, allowing her to cement the seeds of an imagined good life for herself. Ang Mingma's life as an eldest daughter with four younger brothers meant that she shouldered responsibilities from an early age. Her father left home while she was still a teenager, promising their mother and grandparents that he would offer them a better life.

Since a very young age, Ang Mingma had romanticised Darjeeling without knowing much about it; for her, it was a town where dreams of a prosperous life were fulfilled. It was common to imagine Muglan as



Ang Mingma's journey from Khumjung, Nepal to Darjeeling, India. Credit: P. Zeme

a land of opportunities and possibilities. When asked to remember her village, Ang Mingma was hesitant to even draw a map of her village to show me the places she knew, as if it was only yesterday that she had visited there. The names of the villages near Khumjung were as familiar to her as the places in Darjeeling, where she had spent her entire life building a community and a life for her children. She went back home to Khumjung with her entire family once, after several years of being away. In the gap of these many years, her grandmother had passed away, and one of her brothers had married and had children of his own.

Ang Mingma, at times, thinks of the possibility of returning to her ancestral village in Nepal. Almost all of her extended family still lives in Khumjung; a few of her cousins who were in Darjeeling have now passed away. At times, she is filled with doubt and regret, forcing her to question her decision to come to Darjeeling. She wonders if it has been the right choice for her, but she quickly dismisses the thought. And the thought vanishes as soon as she realises that Darjeeling offers her a better, relaxed life; there is nothing much for her back home, except perhaps new opportunities to earn money, as her village, being near Mount Everest, has now grown to be an economic hotspot full of tourists and trekkers alike.

Later, after Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay scaled Mount Everest, Ang Mingma overheard people in her village describing how Hillary had helped connect water pipes from the rivers to tanks in their homes (Johnston 2018). Ang Mingma shares that although the water connection helped them, it was only useful in the summer. In the winter months, the water froze, which meant that they had to collect water from a stream almost two kilometres away in wooden buckets until the ice melted in the spring. It was several years later, after the duo had scaled Mount Everest, that Ang Mingma heard about the changes in her village. She was happy that Hillary could contribute in various ways to the villages near the mighty Everest. Ang Mingma, recollecting her early days in Nepal, reminisces, 'We had to save six months of rations in advance in our village during the six months when food was available for the winter season when harvesting and

sowing were impossible.’ Ang Mingma recalls how one of the greens consumed in Darjeeling, called *ningro* (fiddlehead ferns), was used in her village in Nepal to line the potatoes being stored for the next six months. A pit was dug, and then it was lined with *ningro*; the potatoes were then stacked in an upright position so that even if it rained, the water would not accumulate and spoil the stored potatoes. After stacking the potatoes, they were again lined with *ningro*, and then mud was poured over them. During the winter months, a small hole was created on top so they could pick the potatoes up, and it was then covered again properly; otherwise, the potatoes would freeze due to the cold weather and this would spoil the entire stock. Potatoes were separated into three categories, wherein the smallest potatoes were used for *rildok*, a traditional Sherpa dish. Ang Mingma recounts how the first school was established in her village after decades of them climbing Mount Everest by Edward Hillary. Many of the teachers who came to teach in the school came from the valleys of Nepal and then started growing rice and marigold flowers in Khumjung. They also started growing peas, giving the locals a variety of food and introducing it to the mountains.

Ang Mingma’s story of migration shows us the agential power that they had as young, unmarried women to travel and finally settle in a foreign country. The trajectory of her life may have been easier if she had chosen to stay, is what she shares, but her life in Darjeeling today is filled with leisure. Life in Solukhumbu, near the great Himalayas, where winter months last longer, was tough. It was a task to look after the household, and the only way to have a better life was to labour physically. The enchantment of a foreign land and the hopes of having a better life in the Darjeeling Hills eventually wooed Ang Mingma so that she left her home and her family behind. One can only reminisce about whether her life would have been better in Khumbu, given its growing opportunities. Ang Mingma shares that she is happier now, but only she can ascertain her truth. Only she knows if she is happier here, or if she would have been happier in the home where she lived as a child.

FROM TIBET TO INDIA – STRANGE PLACES AND STRANGER THINGS

Jhangchub Lhamo fled from Tibet in search of her parents after the Tibetan Uprising in 1959. Her story has been passed down to my mother, and it goes like this.

Jhangchub Lhamo was born in the town of Phari in the province of U-tsang and lived with her parents and elder sister. After the 14th Dalai Lama left for India after the Chinese Occupation of Tibet, the Chinese started having the young women in prisons construct roads in Tibet. My grandmother carried rocks for road construction and was paid a meagre amount. One day, she heard the news that both her parents had escaped to India, following the path of the 14th Dalai Lama and taking her cousin's sister with them. A naive but brave woman, she packed her clothes, what little gold she had, and some jewellery, not knowing what currency would come in use on her way to India. Many details of her life are not known; she was a woman who kept to herself and also shared little about her life before she migrated.

The very first time she was stopped by Chinese troops was near the Nathula Pass. Fearing for her life, she escaped, lost and bewildered, in search of her old parents, who had escaped without even sharing that information with her. She felt dismayed; her heart grew a little weaker, but she knew she had to come to India to find her parents. Along with some other families trying to escape Tibet, she attempted to trick the Chinese guards as they strengthened their forces on the border. She could not flee the second time around either.

Disenchanted and having lost all hope of reuniting with her parents, she transported rocks for the construction of roads for some time. Finally, in her third attempt, she managed to escape to India through Sikkim, staying at her relative's home in Gangtok. Ecstatic that she could finally reunite with her parents, she searched the books listing the names of individuals escaping from Tibet. She found her parents' names in these books. Alas! Her happiness was short-lived as, since they were an elderly couple, they had been shifted to the

Southern Camps of India. For souls who had only known the Tibetan temperature and climate, however, the tropical climate was hostile to their weak spirits and bodies. News had arrived that their old, tired bodies could no longer survive due to their inability to adjust to the warm temperature of the plains. Both of her parents died in an unknown land, surrounded by a foreign culture, far away from the mountains and snow, having never reunited with their daughter.

Jhangchub Lhamo's life story is a rigmarole of traversing borders and searching for family, fraught with many secrets. Despite the hardships she endured, working for others and relying on relatives, she was stranded in a country with an unknown language. She could have transported those rocks like her cousins; she left her elder sister and brother behind, who were still imprisoned at the time of her escape. But she was hell-bent on finding her parents and reuniting with them in an unknown land, where the soil smelled different, where the fruits looked different, and where the people spoke a different tongue.

Jhangchub's story is not hers alone; thousands of women have a similar story of forced migration, and their stories give us insight into the experiences of refugees in a foreign country. Tenzing Lhamo currently resides in the Tibetan Refugee Colony in Darjeeling with her eldest daughter. Due to old age, she spends most of her days separating and segregating the raw wool that the complex uses for carpet making. Most of the carpet weavers have become old, and their more educated children have not taken on carpet weaving in the handloom industry, which was one of the most crucial sources of work for Tibetan refugees when establishing a Tibetan economy in exile. Tenzing Lhamo left Tibet as a teenager. She was born in Thoe Lay Lung village in the central province of U-Tsang. Her family was involved in farming and animal husbandry, which were two of her main occupations as well. Her mother died when she was only nine; she had a younger sister and her father, who eventually remarried after her mother's death. She accompanied her maternal uncle on what she believed was a pilgrimage to India, thinking she would return to her family after a month. She saw her father cry before they parted, as he embraced her in his arms;

little did she know that this was the last time that she would be able to see him.

It was deep in the night when Tenzing Lhamo left for India with her maternal uncle, her *ashangla*. They packed tsampa (roasted barley flour) for the road, as yaks and mules carried them across the border. As a young girl, she thought the Chinese police were good people; they gave candies to young Tibetan children every time they saw them. However, little did she know that the Chinese army had slowly infiltrated her village by the time she left for what she believed was a long pilgrimage to India. She was unaware of where they were headed, relying on her *ashangla*; after walking for several days, they reached the Nepalese border town of Tsum in the Gorkha district that bordered Nepal and Tibet. After reaching Tsum, her *ashangla* shared that they were safe and out of danger. Away from home and Tibet, in Tsum, Tenzing Lhamo saw a different culture altogether. 'I saw strange dresses worn by people; everything was very new for me.' It was when she was alone that she realised the depth of the act of escaping from Tibet. 'I missed my father and younger sister immensely, and also felt bad for all the trouble I caused my stepmother.' Under the Nepalese sky, she wondered if she would ever see their faces or embrace them again in her lifetime.

As they reached Tsum, she collected twigs and firewood to cook food. The yaks and mules that had accompanied them over the rough landscape had died one after the other. The difference in temperature and finding little to no fodder on the way eventually weakened their bodies until they could no longer breathe. They stayed in Tsum for three to four months, after which they travelled to Kathmandu. Once they reached Kathmandu, they heard the news that the 14th Dalai Lama had also escaped to India. While this gave them faith that they were safe, they also knew in their hearts that this meant that Tibet was no longer a free country and was under the shackles of the Chinese government.

With heavy hearts, they travelled from Kathmandu to the Indian border town of Raxaul in Bihar on the back of a truck, guided by a

translator and mediator who knew Hindi and Tibetan. Once they reached Raxaul, they travelled to Dharamshala in buses provided by the Indian government. Only when she arrived in India did she realise that she would never return home; the truth of things finally weighed on her frail shoulders. She first registered herself as a Tibetan refugee on the way to Dharamshala; many Tibetans who had just come to India were being directed to resettlement areas in the hill stations of northern India. Tenzing Lhamo witnessed hundreds of camps being set up by the Indian government to resettle Tibetan refugees, and refugee certificates were issued to all of them for identification purposes.

She recalls her first job as a *coolie* (labourer) in Manali, where she carried rocks for road construction in the hilly terrains of Himachal Pradesh. Several other young men and women were hired to build roads for the Indian government; however, Lhamo mentions that the 14th Dalai Lama announced that all women under eighteen should be withdrawn from the construction sites. After these young women were recalled back to Dharamshala, Tenzing Lhamo recalls how Ngari Rinpoche, the youngest brother of the Dalai Lama, taught them to read and write the Tibetan alphabet, as well as to garden in their extra time. Lhamo recalls the first time she saw bananas and *hawai chappal* (rubber flip-flops), which were unfamiliar to her. She shared with a gust of delighted laughter that, like her, 'None of us knew how to eat the fruit and thought it was poison. We had never seen a banana back home in Tibet, and therefore had to be taught to peel the banana by *Kundun* [referring to the 14th Dalai Lama].'

It was after almost two years that Lhamo and three other young women, after receiving an audience with the 14th Dalai Lama, went to Shimla to work as caretakers in a school cum creche. She recalls that the school had very young children who had come from Tibet, and that it was administered by women from the West who were strict about maintaining the children's uniforms and tidiness. A few years after they arrived in Manali, her maternal uncle, too, passed away.

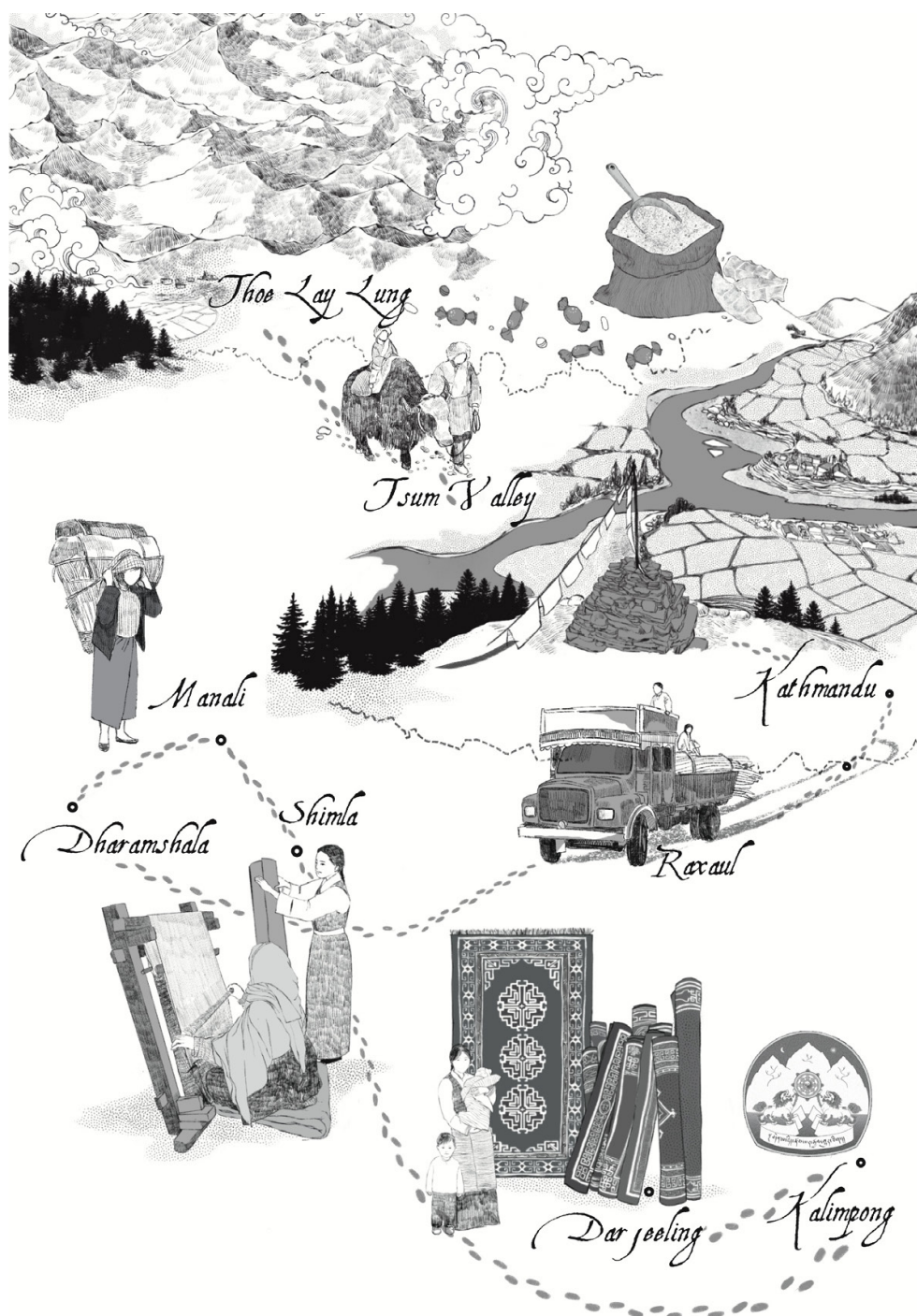
Lhamo worked in Shimla for three years, and it was there that she met her husband, who was eight to ten years older than her. He

used to work as a supervisor at a road construction site. Owing to his good command of the Tibetan language, he was appointed to the Intelligence Bureau. It was also in Shimla that Lhamo learnt carpet weaving, as she started working as a helper in the Carpet Weaving Centre. She shifted to the Tibetan Settlement in Kalimpong after her husband was posted to Sikkim, a settlement which has now closed, and she started working as a helper in the Carpet Weaving Centre in Kalimpong. Finally, at the age of 23, Tenzing Lhamo shifted to the Tibetan Refugee Centre, Darjeeling, along with her children, using her acquired skills in carpet weaving to work in the growing Tibetan handloom industry in Darjeeling.

She worked for almost 50 years in Darjeeling, weaving carpets and forging a community among her fellow handloom artisans, who were also her friends and neighbours. Despite the difficulty of being a refugee, and raising two daughters, Lhamo is a woman who is youthful at the age of 81. She speaks her mind, proud of the life she's built, but she is also aware of and acknowledges the difficulties of living a life in the hills as part of a community that did not receive many benefits from the government. The houses are sufficient to build a home in; the washroom that is shared amongst neighbours is a little far for her old knees now.

Tenzing Lhamo has witnessed it all, from leaving home on the naïve understanding that she was on a pilgrimage to India, with dreams and hopes of returning to her family and playing and running near her home. She had to grow up too soon, labouring day and night to construct roads until young women were recalled from road construction sites. Tenzing Lhamo shared that several years later, after having left Tibet on a pilgrimage to Nepal, she heard the news that her father had passed away in their home in Tibet. Tenzing Lhamo spoke with me in perfect Nepali as she asked her daughter to show me around the Tibetan Refugee Centre in Darjeeling, especially its carpet weaving section, where she had worked for more than two decades.

At present, the number of workers in the carpet industry has declined; most third-generation Tibetans prefer to work in an office.



Tenzing Lhamo's journey from Ü-Tsang, Tibet to Darjeeling, India. Credit: P. Zeme

Access to education has enabled them to find work elsewhere and not work as weavers in the handicraft industry. Some share that the Tibetan carpet weaving industry in Darjeeling is declining and those currently working in it might be the last to do so. Stories of refugees from all over the globe are filled with longing for a home that originates from the uncertainty of their return to their home countries. The difference between Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's journey is how the Lhamo experienced separation of loved ones and little to no choice decision to either stay back or leave their birth country. Tenzing Lhamo's uncle helped her safely pass treacherous mountain paths through snow and rain so they could finally reach Dharamshala. She now finally sits in the Tibetan Refugee Centre, sorting through wool, separating the good from the bad. Lhamo's life story gives us a panoramic view of the migration of Tibetan refugees to India.

These stories of migration, be they forced or economic, look at the precursors that led to migration to Darjeeling in various forms, and how the population scape of the Eastern Himalayas changed over the years. These stories of women also give us insight into how their migration was not the by-product of male-led migration and was rather agential on the part of these women.

GENDERING MIGRATION HISTORIES

Gendered migration histories are crucial to understanding the Eastern Himalayan region and community histories of migration. And also, to understanding and making sense of the migration of my two grandmothers. The migrant body is not a genderless body, and like all aspects of life, gender, class, and race influence this migration. Migration is often viewed as an individual crossing borders, from their place of birth—the nation-state of which they are citizens—to a foreign land and place. The motives behind migration are of utmost priority for the researchers and we must determine who is

labelled what, whether we call them refugees, immigrants, or expats. To understand migration, it is pertinent to understand why it occurs in the first place. Two major justifications for migration were brought forward by various scholars who analysed both the immigrant and refugee experience, wherein for the former's it is driven by economic motivation, and for the latter, it is more political.

Singh (2018) defines migration as the movement of a population across an international border or within a state, irrespective of the length or cause. Singh writes that the largest migration in the history of South Asia was during the partition of the Indian sub-continent into two nations, India and Pakistan. Singh also notes that there is a feminisation of labour migration from South Asia and that migration in South Asia is entrenched in a patriarchal culture; there is conflict-related displacement and development-related displacement, the decline of agriculture, the erosion of natural resources and natural disasters.

Women and mountains share an intricate relationship; therefore, pressure on mountain resources can threaten their livelihoods. Since women are usually the ultimate users of natural resources, their contribution to promoting sustainable use is of the utmost importance. Mountain women remain the marginalised gender of the already marginalised mountain areas, and thus face double marginalisation. Sherpa (2007) writes that mountain people, especially within the Nepalese context, face harsh environmental and climatic conditions and difficult geographical terrains. They note that the region suffers from issues of identity recognition, with environmental degradation, and poverty; often, gender development gets sidelined and is limited only to political speeches and documents. Bhadwal (2019) notes that, oftentimes, there is a bias observed against women within ethnic communities shaped by the political history of Sikkim, wherein identity has played a huge role, based on poverty plays a role in shaping gender vulnerabilities in the Eastern Himalayan context. As Bhadwal's (2019) research shows, the gendered vulnerability is in turn affected by women's access to social capital as well as dependency

on environmentally sensitive and dependent livelihoods in the Eastern Himalayas. In this light, Sherpa (2007) notes that due to the focus on the gendered migration of men from the mountains leads to the feminisation of poverty in the mountains, i.e., it leads to the perception of women being poorer thus creating gendered migration trends. These gender-differentiated vulnerabilities are factors that influence the lives and livelihoods of people in intertwined and mostly unseen ways. This also results from existing social constructs and a dependence on environmentally sensitive livelihoods in the hills.

Politics and policies, in the larger framework of the nation-state, influence the whole process of migration, from the very motivation to leave and the choice of destination to the terms of admission and migrants' social and political inclusion in their host society. Piper's (2006) essay 'Gender the Politics of Migration' helps us look at larger political structures through a gender and migration framework. While the essay puts forth that migration creates political challenges in terms of policy and politics, it examines how gender is crucial to all questions that arise within the context of migration. As Hollifield (in Piper 2006) notes, 'politics affect migration, and migration also affects politics'. Migrant women from the mountainous region have been seen as accompanying spouses and not as independent migrants. The personal histories of both Ang Mingma and Tenzin Lhamo, while very different and without many parallels, tell us differently about migration from Nepal and Tibet to India.

The Eastern Himalayan region has undergone many changes with regard to migration, and stories like these also bring us to look at how crucial it is for us to look at women as decision-makers. While the gendered dimensions of migration affect women in many ways, it also allows us to focus on these dimensions other than the narrative of women only accompanying their male counterparts as family members. We must therefore examine what migration for women from the Himalayan regions in Nepal to India was like during the 1960s. Sharma and Thapa's (2013) working paper on Nepali migrants notes that 'the growing population, scarcity of agricultural lands,

high rates of taxation and interest have forced generations of Nepalis to seek alternative forms of livelihood in India'. A large number of Nepalese individuals were also recruited into the Indian army or the British Indian Army. Gender and migration are crucial intersections to be critically examined against the background of ethnicity, political context and class, and such intertwinements have shaped migration especially from Nepal to India. On the other hand, migration from nations where individuals are fleeing violence and political conflict, women have been represented as passive victims while they transform themselves to be active participants for better survival and prospects (Field, Pandit and Rajdev 2021). However, Field et al. (2021), have looked at the changing conceptualisation, especially in the case of Rohingya women and women negotiating and taking the lead in their own migration can also be seen in Tibetan women's migration in India, especially where stories like Tenzing Lhamo's depict how they used the ploy of travelling for pilgrimage to flee to India.

For women refugees, gendered experiences of migration from their home country to a transit country and then resettlement in a developing country are different. The resettlement process for refugees is additionally difficult, as they are faced with isolation and the need to integrate within their host countries (Nasser-Eddin 2017). Lhamo's and Jhangchub's experiences of forced migration stories reflect this isolation. They did not know any language other than Tibetan, and they communicated using hand movements and gestures while they were resettling in Darjeeling and Shimla. They also felt the need to integrate and live harmoniously within the Tibetan resettlement projects in India, a result of what has been portrayed as the benevolence of the Indian government. Women's perspectives have been absent and invisible in descriptions of the migration of Tibetans to India. Tibetan women's trials and tribulations as a community have only been studied in relation to their political activism or economic involvement in exile. This very gap makes it crucial for us to document the narratives of individuals like Tenzing Lhamo, who migrated as a young teenage girl with hopes of returning home. It is also a retelling of stories such

as that of the many Jhangchubs who lost their parents, either in India or on their journey, worn out due to hunger and the arduous journey from the Tibetan Plateau to the plains and hills of India.

The question of gender in migration is pertinent. It has been raised by scholars in different contexts, but not sufficiently researched in the context of the Eastern Himalayas, where migration from both Tibet and Nepal has been a common phenomenon, especially during the 1960s. Ang Mingma, Tenzing Lhamo, Sarki Lhamu and Jhangchub Lhamo's journeys, albeit divergent and set in different contexts, are intertwined by fate, all four of them having resettled in the Darjeeling Hills at the end of their journey. Despite the challenges unique to their experiences of women migrating due to economic and political structures, one cannot deny how gender and migration for these women have shaped their fate. Be it Ang Mingma and Sarki Lhamu's decisive power and choice to be part of economic migration for better opportunities in Darjeeling. Or Jhangchub and Tenzing Lhamo's difficult journey towards freedom. For them, the exile position is a temporary one, where one day, all those in exile living in refugee camps will be given an opportunity to return to their cultural homelands, the homeland of their birth and memories. Both migrations are ultimately for a better life of their own. There is no binary of the good versus the bad migrant; they ultimately deserve to live a better life with more support than they lacked in their home countries.

CONCLUSION

I have often thought about the hurdles that Jhangchub Lhamo and Sarki Lhamu faced as young women – as migrants and refugees finding a footing of their own in a predominantly male world. Both ran shops that sold *momo*, *thukpa* and *tingmo*, along with locally brewed alcohol, to make ends meet. They ventured into business, met their partners, and finally settled in life; to what extent were they satisfied with the life they had created? There is little we can know for sure. They might

have married for social security as young, unmarried women who were vulnerable to the gaze of prying men and for convenience, to men from their own communities. Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's stories allow us to appreciate the work they put in to live a life of their own despite the innumerable hurdles they encountered – both of them were women of grit. They also allow us to think of migration differently, from their social vantage point.

This research especially draws from the life stories of four women from the Himalayas to the Eastern Himalayas, specifically Darjeeling, allowing us to revisit and analyse their journeys. The reality in the 1960s was a lack of proper communication, which is not the case now. Additional challenges of finding a support system in a foreign country and also trying to earn a living as a migrant without any proper education and an absence of adequate training in Hindi and Nepali restricted what work they could take on. Class has shaped both Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's experiences as migrants; their stories would have been different if their kinship networks in India had been more robust, and if they had received a proper education in their respective hometowns. There is no single story of migration from Nepal and Tibet, and the lives of migrants are invariably shaped by their gender, class, educational background, and the time during which they choose to migrate.

As researchers, we must continue to read against the grain of the single narratives that continue to shape our understanding of the histories of border-crossing in the Eastern Himalayas. Narratives of migration that trace historical trajectories that have influenced, shaped and continue to define questions of belonging, citizenship and identities in past and contemporary times are crucial for us to document, as they produce alternative narratives and readings of the people and the place under study. The Eastern Himalayan region has been a melting pot of communities living together in harmony and mutual respect, whose histories are defined by the realities of cross-border migration and movement. Hence, it is crucial to look at the region and the various micro-histories that have always defined its

socio-political and cultural fabric. Ang Mingma and Tenzing Lhamo's stories bring women's migration histories to the fore. These stories are crucial in documenting these lived histories is crucial to arriving at a more nuanced and detailed understanding than provided by mainstream, homogenised histories. It also allows us to understand the challenges of being a migrant in a region that has boasted of its multicultural relations with Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan. The histories of women from this region will lead us to understand not only why they migrate but also how the region became a destination for women migrants migrating in different historical contexts, which helps us arrive at a more complex perspective of the hills that I call home.

NOTE

1. The names of the interviewees have been changed for this research.

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