Life In Limbo

Tibetan refugees have been calling Nepal their home since the 1960s. With their carpets, artwork, food, and crafts, they have had a tremendous influence on Nepali culture. However, in recent years, new obstacles have been arising for the next generation of Tibetans.

Tan Pei Lin

March 1959 - a dark time for Tibetans. After the 1959 Tibetan Uprising, and the subsequent exile of the Dalai Lama, 20,000 Tibetans fled to Nepal, besides other neighboring countries. Numerous settlements were established for the refugees, and infertile land, diseases, and a lack of food plagued these "temporary" settlements in the early days.

Asylum seekers who arrived in Nepal before 1989 were granted legal refugee status by the Nepalese government. In 1995 and 1999, the authorities issued refugee identity cards. But, later, the program stopped. This left thousands of exiles undocumented and unaccounted for. These Tibetans do not hold identity cards and have no form of paperwork. Their names only appear on their parents' cards. With no ID, they are helpless – in terms of traveling abroad, opening a bank account or basically anything that requires some form of identification.

The lives of these Tibetans from Generation Y contrast greatly with those of their parents. With shelter, education, and basic needs provided for, these young adults are more educated than their elders, and desire much more than a life spent in the settlements. They want to explore the world, they want proper jobs and they want equal rights.

Regrettably, these are dreams that appear to be unachievable today. Although armed and qualified with degrees, with no form of identification these Tibetans cannot leave the country

(except, perhaps, to India). There are Tibetans who live in Nepal, India, and Bhutan who have never set foot on their home soil, and probably never will.

Deadlocked in a state of limbo, they often have to settle for jobs that undermine their potential. Only a rare few manage to crawl up the ladder of social equity. Being refugees in a foreign country that hasn't kicked them out yet, some might argue that they should be grateful for having a roof over their heads. But these Tibetans, who are practically stateless (and have never seen Tibet in the flesh), are unable to accomplish the most ordinary of things because they don't "exist" legally. Leading the life of a normal citizen is probably the hardest thing for them.

The situation is not just affecting the educated lot, there are some who have lost motivation and interest in completing their education, making their future seem bleaker than it already is. They pass their time doing odd jobs or playing Ping Pong within the settlements. Long-term goals are far off, and what matters to most is making "small" money.

Shouldn't every individual be entitled to his or her own identity? This seems to be going against everything written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To be free and equal without distinction of any kind? To travel freely in and out of any country including his/her own? What we take for granted is unheard of for these refugees. The new generation are Tibetan by birth but they have not seen their own country or know much of its traditions except for the stories and tales handed down by their elders.

However, there is no denying the desire that burns within the hearts of the Tibetan refugees, harboring hope that one day they will be able to return *home*; home, where the pictures their elders have painted in their minds will materialize, and where they'll be able to truly call Tibet their homeland again.

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Think//Friday Films

Tussle between the Unequal

Prawin Adhikari

The line that divides the two sides in a game of kabaddi also separates the ultimately weak from the strong. Ram Babu Gurung's charmingly signaled *Kabaddi*, currently well-poised to be a box-office triumph of exaggerated proportions, is a film similarly divided by the midpoint – between a strong half and a weak one. The first half is relentlessly charming. The second half is troublingly clichéd and puzzling: why did the movie take this baffling turn? Is this the denouement promised by the initial setup in the picturesque Mustang village of Naurikot?

Dayahang Rai's loutish Kaji wants to marry his cousin Maiya, played with delicate defiance by Rishma Gurung. But, a seducer arrives from the big bad city, in the shape of Nischal Basnet's Visitor. Kaji has a posse of hangers-on: one who will gamble away his chicken and goats the first thing in the morning, and another who just wants the Kaji to get married, so that he'll be granted a loan out of Kaji's magnanimity, to fund his aspirations to fly abroad. The tradition of kidnapping a betrothed if she defies the cultural contract forms the backdrop.

But, you really have to watch *Kabaddi* to experience the unique tone, language, humor and beauty of the movie. Be prepared to miss a few of the laughs because those around you will be screaming with laughter, even before the movie starts: the notice about the movie being a work of fiction sets off the laughs, which continue well after the end-credits have rolled. Although we are reminded repeatedly that the story takes place a mere 400 kilometers away from Kathmandu, it feels like we are getting to witness events in a faraway world. The landscape is as hauntingly beautiful as the inhabitants are quirky. There is a certain lyricism brought to the story by the setting that resonates with Kaji's one-line quips: the setting is the moral and aesthetic core, the characters are outward manifestations of it. If any of the characters are removed from that setting, or if an outsider tries to inject himself into the setting, the rough-and-tumble but balanced mores and codes will become upset.

Starring
Dayahang rai, Nischal Basnet, Rajan Khatiwada, Rishma Gurung, Bijaya Baral, Buddhi Tamang, Sishir Bangdel, Aruna Karki Pokheral, Pashupati Rai

Directed By
Rambabu Gurung

Written By
Rambabu Gurung

Screenplay By
Rambabu Gurung

Produced By
Nischal Basnet, Sunil Chand Rauniyar

Nepali cinema has used exotic locales as its settings for a long time now. But, dressing up Rajesh Hamal in artfully patched *daura* never made him an authentic *gaunle*: to do that, actors have to change their faces, their voices. Reach back to the notion of personae. The first half of *Kabaddi* is a delight for what it achieves: the setting, the characters, the notions and nuances all come together better than we've had the privilege to witness onscreen so far.

Kabaddi, without doubt, is an important event in Nepali cinema this year. Ram Babu Gurung's voice, as evident in the first half, deserves being celebrated for painting with such ease a distinct culture and a unique yearning in its midst. However, the second half is a complete betrayal of the viewer's trust. It seems that the team delighted in taking up a challenge, faced it with full heart and humor, but couldn't carry itself past the midpoint. Then, the inevitable quarry of clichés is dug with mirthless energy. I kept trying to imagine what *Kabaddi* would have been like without the second half, with the story propelled by the premise set in the first half. But, that shouldn't be the viewer's job – that responsibility is very squarely the filmmakers'. *Kabaddi*, because of its initial bounty of laughter and because of its promise of ambition, is also a disappointment. But, at least, the original risk was taken – and for that we ought to celebrate the team behind *Kabaddi*.