

DAAD PROMOS Programme

-- Mobility and Experience Report

Research Topic:

Tibetan Medicine and Changing Climate in Kathmandu, Nepal

Fields:

Anthropology (Ethnology), South Asia Studies, Environmental Studies, Ethnomedicine and Public Health

Duration of Stay:

3 August to 13 October 2023

Methodology:

Ethnographic and Qualitative Methods, Media Research



o Preparation for the stay (language, cultural matters, politics, dealings with authorities, etc.)

Nepali people in general speak fluent English, especially those in the tourist areas of Kathmandu. Nevertheless, Nepali is the lingua franca in the country, we will amaze and impress local people if we can communicate with them with basic Nepali greetings and dialogues. Basic Nepali is also useful for buying grocery, vegetable, and fruits etc. in local markets as many rural sellers speak limited English. In specific communities at Boudha and Swayambhu, Tibetan language is also common among exiled Tibetans and people from the Himalayas of Nepal.

Religions are everywhere in Nepal. Hinduism is the mainstream religion for many local people, yet its boundary with Buddhism is blurred in many aspects of local people's everyday life, we might be told "we are both Hindu and Buddhist" by Nepali-speaking people and many Nepali people visit and worship both Hindu and Buddhist temples. This is something distinctive and interesting within the religious landscape of Nepal. Within Buddhism, one can find Newari Buddhism (Newari language as the literal means derived from Sanskrit), Tibetan Buddhism (Tibetan language), and Theravada Buddhism in Nepal. To respect and be sensitive to people's religious practices is important to communicate and interact with local people. For example, people at the Boudhanath walk in clockwise direction around the big stupa, it is highly suggested to follow them in the same direction.

There are also many customary differences between Nepali people and foreigners. For example, Nepali people often greet others with the greeting "Namaste!", they say it with their palms closed together sincerely; to receive any article from Nepali people, it's always respectful to receive and hold them with two hands. If one wants to try traditional Nepali food with hands, always use the right hand.

International visitors can apply for arrival visa to enter Nepal for 15, 30, 90 days up to 5 months within each calendric year. In order to smooth your formality at the Tribhuvan Airport, one can fill up the online form on the official website of the Immigration of the Government of Nepal beforehand, then by showing an assigned code, one can save much time from the queueing up at the airport. Money exchange and purchase of local Sim Card can be settled at the airport as well.

Nepali is a democratic country. It is the first South Asian country to allow same-sex marriage and recognise the others gender category. Nevertheless, there are many socio-political problems e.g. poverty and unstable economic conditions that upset Nepali people. For instance, foreigners being followed by street children and begging are a common street scene in tourist areas. Moreover, massive protests and rallies take place sometimes, one can pay attention local media and ask local people to plan their schedules ahead and avoid traffic congestions.

o short description of the research project in the host country

My research project adopts the perspectives of anthropology to bridge the domains of ethnomedicine and climate change. It explores and investigates how Tibetan medicine, also commonly called *amchi* medicine in the Himalayas, responds to health-related issues and challenges in the age of climate change and instability.

Data of the study are collected by ethnographic fieldwork in Tibetan-Nepali speaking communities at Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal.

Findings of the proposed research aims to provide a case study of how climate change has impacts on people's health and how Tibetan medicine has responded to those problems in a complex urban setting of Kathmandu. It also explores and foregrounds the healing perspectives and practices of Tibetan medicine that deals with climate-related ailments among local people.

o Stay in the host country (personal experiences and impressions, life outside the university, etc.)

Nepali is a hospitable country that welcomes international visitors. Local people are generally gentle, friendly, and helpful. One can receive the common greeting "Namaste!" with smiles everywhere across the country.

In Kathmandu, aesthetic, historical, and cultural monuments are scattered at different areas in the city, we often pass by them even we are not aware. All make Kathmandu Valley an enthralling place to study arts history and architecture of Hinduism and Buddhism, in addition to religions and other subjects.

STUDY

Nepal is a country with ethno-religious and linguistic diversity, the country has preserved many languages of South Asia, be they ancient or of ethnic minorities. Therefore, considerable amount of international students and enthusiasts come to Nepal to study Nepali, Sanskrit, Newari, and Tibetan languages in addition to studying Buddhism and Nepali musical instruments. Besides study programmes offered by local universities, famous private institute like Rangjung Yeshe Institute and other private organisations at Boudha provide regular language courses at different levels.

ACCOMMODATION

If one joins a study programme at Boudha (or other areas in Kathmandu), one can rent a guest room from guesthouses run by private agents or Buddhist monasteries within the area. Many local guesthouses provide discounted rates of long-term stay, but we need to bear in mind that rooms can often get full quickly since September as that is the start of the peak season for international visitors. Alternatively, many international students look for a room or home-stay for their study programme that lasts for 2 or 3 months or even longer. We can find advertising posts from Facebook groups and/or notice boards of some restaurants popular among international visitors, for instance, Utpala Café at Boudha is a good place to know people and get information. It is highly advised to visit a room and check their facilities like the water quality and electricity supply before final decision and any payment. Many people stay in a guesthouse or budget hotel in order to look for a right accommodation in their first week of arrival.

FOOD

A variety of cuisines can be found easily in Kathmandu. Western, Chinese, and Japanese food are available, in addition to local Nepali (e.g. thali, laphing), Newari, and Tibetan food (e.g. momos, thukpas, Tibetan laphing). If one wants to find a café to study or work, there are options at Boudha and Thamel, and café culture is a rising phenomenon among Nepali young people. Beware of consuming street food and drinks (e.g. cold fresh juicy and fruits during summertime) as we are likely not immune to germs that local people get used to. I have witnessed foreign visitors getting diarrhoea and other diseases because of careless eating and drinking.

LEISURE

Kathmandu is a big city full of histories and cultures, and it is also surrounded by beautiful mountains, so there is much to see and experience. Historically, there are three major ancient kingdoms, including Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur, that are currently divided as three districts in the city. Each of them has its own Durbar Square with museums for domestic and international visitors. Among all, the Patan Museum is a jewel which comprehensively exhibits the local tradition of handicraftsman with appealing artefacts, including copper religious statues, wood carvings, and scroll paintings so on and so forth. More than that, the central areas of Patan and Bhaktapur are punctuated with many Hindu and Buddhist temples and shrines, their old streets, houses, and the local lives are lively and atmospheric since hundreds of years ago.

o Practical tips and personal evaluation of your stay at the host institution and in the host country

HEALTH

Please be reminded that between May and late September is the monsoon season in Nepal, it is also the main period for the outbreak of the mosquito-borne Dengue Fever in the recent years, let alone its rainy days bringing inconvenience for outing. Visitors are highly recommended to apply mosquito repellent on their body to prevent mosquito bites. If not, my personal experiences tell me that the mosquitoes are smart enough to bite people even we are in pants and socks.

Getting sickness caused by poor quality of tap water can be heard quite often, many foreigners prefer to drink bottled water, and for longer stay, it is a good idea to purchase a kettle to make boiling water so as to avoid produce too much plastics.

In case one needs handy medicines, pharmacies are highly accessible across Kathmandu, for sore throat, cold, and flu, medicines like paracetamol and cough syrups are available in those pharmacies.

o You are welcome to add tips for other students and photos (anonymised) to your experiences.

TRANSPORTS

Traffic is often very busy during daytime across Kathmandu, roads are full of cars and motorbikes especially between 4:30pm to 6:30pm, which are the peak hours in the late afternoon. Motorbikes are the most common vehicles for people living in Kathmandu, and it is the best means to reach different places from point to point.

It's highly advisable to use applications such InDrive, Pathao etc. to check local prices and look for rides of taxi or motorbike within the city area. For point-to-point travel and for ensuring punctuality, motorbike is more useful. If one needs to take taxi on streets without the help of those above-mentioned apps, prices can also be fixed based on an agreement between the driver and passenger, usually after a brief negotiation. Passengers need to bring their own helmets for safety if they take a motorbike ride, own masks for preventing dust and air pollutant should also be prepared.

We have to be prepared for air pollution in Kathmandu after the monsoon season, it is common to see local people putting on masks during their motorbike rides on dusty streets. Sometimes labour protest and rally of different industries will take place, and the flow of traffic will be disrupted. Therefore, it will be wise to keep an eye on local news during long stay and spare sufficient time for outing.

I hope this report would be useful for students who will do exchange programme or research work in Nepal.

