

Chapter 5

Labour Migration from Nepal: Trends and Explanations



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5.1 Introduction

Labor migration now has a significant influence in Nepal's society and economy. The migration of labor force and the resultant social and financial remittances have reshaped household livelihood structure and country's economy (Adhikari, 2021). Nepal received around \$8.3 billion – equivalent to about 30% of GDP – remittance in 2018/19 (World Bank, 2019). Both migration volume and remittance inflow have been increasing at an accelerated rate since the late 1990s, even though there is slight fluctuation from time to time. There has also been profound increase in proportion of households receiving remittances. For example, only 23.4% households received remittances in 1995/96, which increased to 55.8% in 2010/11 (CBS, 2012). The volume of remittances received by remittance-recipient households also increased significantly in the last two decades; this increased from Rs 15,160 (per recipient household per year) in 1995/96 to Rs 204,782 in 2016 – increased by almost 14 times. Remittance contributed 26.6% of household income of remittance-recipient households in 1995/96, which increased to 62% in 2016 (CBS, 2012; IMF, 2020). The general migration pattern of Nepal changed drastically because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many migrants working in India and Gulf countries/Malaysia return to Nepal. A significant proportions of these migrants faced various discriminations in the place of their work, while returning to Nepal, and then reintegrating to their societies (Adhikari et al., 2022).

This chapter analyses the changing trend in migration and then explains why such it is growing. It takes a historical approach, as there are different currents of migration at different periods as shaped by the changing circumstances of both

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internal and international social, political and economic situations. In addition, different groups of people (based on class, caste/ethnicity and gender, and geographical region) were affected by these circumstances differently influencing their migration patterns. The analysis clearly shows that a single theoretical lens is not enough to explain historical trend of migration or its contemporary nature. A nuanced analysis or perspective is required based on both internal and external political economy and internal social structure encompassing class, ethnicity, gender and regional perspective.

5.2 Nepal –Changing Trends of Migration

Although immigration of people from other countries was important for peopling of Nepal in the distant past, emigration to other countries for work started in the process of unification of the country since 1760s and in its aftermath (Adhikari, 2017a). Even during this process, influence from external forces, particularly British colonial/expansionist regime, had played some role in the emigration of Nepalis to work in other countries. In recent times, especially after 1990, however, the process of globalization that has opened up opportunities for the easily sourced and low cost workers in newly industrializing countries has contributed in the migration of individuals for contract work. This time period also coincides with political change in Nepal. The influence of this external and internal change can be seen in migration data as presented in Table 5.1 and Fig. 5.1, which show that since 1990, there is drastic change in the destination countries for the work. Now, it is clearly seen that an overwhelming proportion of Nepali migrants go beyond India (especially to Gulf countries and Malaysia) for work. In the past, this migration was confined mainly to India. Nepalis have also started going to developed countries for work even though

Table 5.1 Foreign migrant workers (absentee population; Figures in brackets are percent)

Year	Total population	Absentee POPULATION	Absentee as % of total	% Absentees in India	% Absentees in other countries	Male (%)	Female (%)
1942	6,283,649	87,722	1.4	–	–	–	–
1952/54	8,473,478	198,120	2.34	–	–	87.6	12.4
1961	9,741,466	328,470	3.37			–	–
1971	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
1981	15,425,816	402,977	2.61	93.1	6.9	81.5	18.5
1991	19,149,387	658,290	3.44	89.2	9.8	83.2	16.8
2001	23,499,115	762,181	3.24	77.3	22.7	89.2	10.8
2011	26,494,504	1,921,494	7.25	37.6	62.4	87.6	12.4*
2021	29,192,480	2,169,478	7.43	–	–	81.28	18.72

Source: CBS (1986, 1992, 2002, 2011), Kansakar (2003) and CBS (2021) *65 did not identify the gender

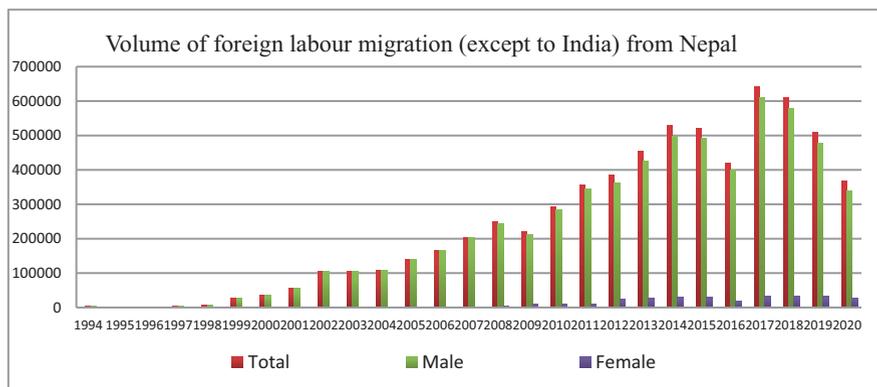


Fig. 5.1 Volume of migration for work in foreign countries (other than India). (Source (www.dofe.gov.np), MoLESS (2020)). Because of difference in fiscal year and chronological year, the data of 1994 is, in fact, of 1993–94, and so on)

this is still a minor stream. Therefore, now, Nepali migrant workers can be categorized into three main streams – migrants to India, migrants to Gulf countries (GCC) and Malaysia and other countries in Asia, and migrants to developed countries or what is called Wealthy Western and Asian (WWA) countries (Williams et al., 2020).

5.3 Migration to India

Migration of people from Nepal to India has a long history. Table 5.1 shows a trend of migration to India using the census data, which take absentee population as proxy for migration for work in other countries. As absentee population does not take into account the migration of less than six months, it underestimates the actual magnitude of migration; especially, it does not include seasonal migration of less than 6 months duration. Various studies reveal that there are anywhere between 1.8 million and 3 million Nepali migrant workers in India (Dixit, 1997). On the other hand, another study revealed that there are at the most 0.7–0.8 million Nepalis working in India (Kollmaire et al., 2006). Such inconsistencies arise because of ‘open border’ between Nepal and India as guided by the Peace and Friendship Treaty made in 1950, which allows peoples of both countries to freely cross the border and find employment without any restrictions. For many poor Nepali people, India has been an accessible and a popular destination for work to secure the livelihood of, or reduce the burden, on the family. Baral considers India as a ‘safety valve’ for Nepal (1992), i.e., whenever there is crisis, people move to India to earn their livelihoods. This was also true during the political conflict period (Maoist people’s war in the period 1996–2006).

In recent times, the proportion of migrants going to India has declined drastically since they have started to move to Gulf States and Malaysia because of relatively

better income in these countries. For example, in 1981, about 93% of the migrants (absentee population) went to India; but by 2011 only 37.6% of the migrants went to India (Table 5.1). But, India is still a main destination for the poorer people. For example, migrants from the poorest regions of Nepal (Far-west and mid-west regions) go to India for work.

5.4 Migration to Countries Other than India (Mainly Gulf Countries and Malaysia)

Nepalis started going to other countries (other than India) mainly from the early 1990. Prior to that, the Nepali State had restricted citizens' travel to foreign countries (except for India). The political change in 1990 removed restrictions to travel to other countries and created an environment for the private recruitment agencies (RAs) to work effectively as business ventures. These RAs then facilitated people to find work in overseas countries. According to the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) that keeps record of migrants who have gone to other countries (than India) for work, about four million individuals have gone out for the work in a decade 2007–08 to 2018–19. The volume of migration since 1993, based on DoFE database, is presented in Fig. 5.1.

Nepal's government has given permission to its citizens to work in 128 countries as of 2018/19. After peaking up labour permits for foreign employment in 2016, there has been slight reduction since then. These migrant workers go abroad for work through the help of private recruitment agencies. The Government of Nepal also sends its people to work in Republic of Korea through Employment Permit Scheme (EPS); it sent around 59,000 Nepalis in a decade 2008/09 to 2018/19 – with an average of 7500 to 8500 a year. Foreign employment is still a domain of males – as female migrants accounted for only around 5% in the decade of 2008/09 to 2018/19.

In terms of countries of destination, most Nepali migrants go to Gulf States (Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) and Malaysia. In 2017/18, 92% of the migrants landed in these countries, and in 2018/19, this figure was 88%. This clearly shows lack of diversity in the migration. Among Nepali migrant workers, the Qatar was the major destination countries (32%) followed by Malaysia (24%), UAE and Saudi Arabia (17% in each) during the period of 2015–2019. For male migrant workers, UAE, Qatar, Malaysia, Jordan, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Turkey were the major destination countries in the same period. Whereas for female workers, who work mainly as domestic help, the major countries of destination include UAE, Qatar, Malaysia, Kuwait, Jordan and Cyprus, which account for about three-fourths of the female migrants (IOM, 2019). Covid-19 made the lives of a large majority of migrants working in these countries difficult as they could not easily return to Nepal because of flight problem. On the other hand, job cuts and wage

cheating and other discrimination was also relatively high for these migrants (Adhikari et al., 2022).

5.5 Migration to Developed Countries

Migration to developed countries like the UK, North America, Australia many European countries, Japan, and Republic of Korea is a new trend, and participation in this migration stream is still small, but it is also growing faster. Migrants working in these countries derive higher income and are relatively better placed in terms of protection of human rights and labor rights. But these countries are accessible to people from relatively better economic and social conditions in terms of wealth and education. Student migration is a major pathway for this type of migration. The volume of student migration from Nepal to such developed countries has been increasing rapidly over the years representing 26,948 in 2009/10 to 63,259 in 2018/19, with Australia as the main destination country (57.4% in 2018/19) for Nepali students (Adhikari, 2019; IOM, 2019). A tendency of nurse migration to developed countries has also been growing in Nepal. A study has revealed that between 2000 and 2008, around 1000 Nepali nurses migrated to the UK (Adhikari, 2013). Nepal has also recently entered with formal agreement with UK¹ and Israel² Governments for the temporary migration of nurses. Most migrant workers in developed countries have no intention to return, and as a result, do not remit much.

5.6 Covid-19 Pandemic and Emigration from Nepal

Like in many parts of the world, Covid-19 also upended migration pattern in Nepal. The Government of Nepal estimated that about half a million migrant workers needed to be rescued from Gulf countries and Malaysia alone. About 200,000 Nepali migrant workers in India were reported to have returned to Nepal just before the national lockdown in March 2020, and many thousands of them were stranded in Nepal-India border after the lockdown was imposed (IoM, 2020). COVID-19 also put a halt in the process of migration of potential migrants. There were about 115,000 most potential migrants who had taken labour permits from the government but were not able to leave because of travel restrictions. About 328,681 aspirant migrants who had taken pre-approvals have also been halted due to this crisis (IoM, 2020). COVID-19 has created serious problems on those migrants who were undocumented, domestic workers, workers whose contractual period was over and

¹ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2022/08/23/nepal-and-uk-sign-deal-to-recruit-nepali-nurses-in-the-uk-healthcare-sector>

² <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/07/21/israel-set-to-start-taking-in-nepali-caregivers-soon>

those who were already in exploitative situation during migration process (NHRC, 2020). A survey of these returned migrants had found that slightly more than half of them would like to return when it is safe and another half wanting to do something in Nepal (IoM, 2020). The impact was also seen among current migrants at the destination countries. Of the total surveyed participants, about 30% did not receive full salary whereas 29% did not receive salary on time during the period of COVID-19 (Blitz & Humanity United, 2022). During the first wave of COVID-19, only 32% received support from friends/relatives at destination country and about 25% were supported by their own company/employer whereas only 4.4% were supported by Nepali Embassy (Ibid).

But, after about six months (By September, 2020), many returned migrants from India (who happen to be mainly from Far-west and Mid-west Nepal, poorest regions in Nepal) started to re-migrate for work despite the knowledge that the COVID-19 problem in India was getting worse. These migrants reported that they could not sustain their livelihoods in their villages (Ayer, 2020). This clearly showed that poorer people are more worried about food and livelihood than the COVID-19 infection itself.

The case of wage theft was incidental at the destination country before the COVID-19, but the cases of wage theft had compounded among Nepali migrant workers during the period of pandemic. A study carried out by National Network for Safe Migration (NNSM) in 2021 reveals the fact that about 43% respondents received 20–40% less salary than agreed whereas about 10% received less than 90% less salary than agreed (NNSM, 2021). Similarly, about 24% respondents received 90–100% less payment of extra working hour whereas about 42% received 0–10% less payment of overtime work. During pandemic, nearly 32% faced the problem of 100% salary deduction due to complete closure of company and mobility restriction whereas 26% only did not face the salary deduction issue (Ibid).

Furthermore, duration of unpaid leave due to COVID-19 among Nepali migrants varies with country of destination and nature of work. The significant proportion of returnee migrants i.e. 61% came back to Nepal for 2–4 months period unpaid leave which is followed by 1–2 months (19.35%), 4–6 months (6%) and the least proportion (3%) of returnee who came to Nepal with more than 8 months period unpaid leave (Ibid).

5.7 Composition of Migrants in Different Streams

The class and social composition of migrants and their destination countries show a clear pattern. For example, most of the migrants are poor. Poverty and class categories in Nepal are defined mainly by the level of income. The latest survey in this regard was done in 2010–11 in the form of Nepal Living Standard Survey, which revealed poverty line as Nepali Rs 19,262 per capita per year, which was considered to be required to meet basic living (CBS, 2012) or what was called consumption expenses. The Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) 2010/11 data on migrants in

relation to consumption quintile demonstrate that the majority of the first and second poorest people (62% and 51% respectively) are believed to be outside the country (CBS, 2012).³ As the volume of migration to India, where poorer people go for work, is still large, there is dominance of ‘lower class’ (first and second poorest people) in this migration flow. Another study reveals that migrants in the poorest group (defined by wealth-ranking exercise in the study) go to India, lower middle class to Malaysia and Gulf States, and upper middle class and upper class go to developed countries like USA, Europe and Australia (Adhikari, 2001; Gurung, 2014). Very poor people (bottom 20%) (Adhikari, 2001; CBS, World Bank, DFID and ADB, 2006) cannot migrate or even move to other parts of the country and they depend on whatever work is available within their villages and nearby places as they cannot pay the financial cost required for the mobility.

The migration streams by caste/ethnicity in Nepal yields unique feature. Of the diverse ethnic composition of the country (126 caste/ethnic groups), major groups include: Brahmin, Chettri, Dalits, Janajatis, Newars, Muslims and Others. Brahmins and Newars have the lowest poverty rates (around 10.5%) and are considered to be wealthiest in general, even though there is some diversity within each group. This is followed by Chettri (poverty rate about 23.4%), Janajatis (indigenous population – poverty about 27%), and Dalits (about 42%).⁴ Dalits are the groups considered to be most disadvantaged socially and economically.

A study conducted in Nepal by Blitz Media Private Ltd. and Humanity United (2022) reveals the fact that out of total surveyed migrant participants, the highest proportion was represented by Brahmin/Chhetri (35.6%) and Pahadi (hill) Janajati/Indigenous Nationalities (29.2%). Whereas Madhesi (Terai) Dalit and Muslim represented the lowest proportion of respondents (i.e. 5.2% and 2.1% respectively). According to the proportion of respondents by provinces, the highest proportion of respondents in Sudur Paschim (far-west) and Karnali (mid-west) were Dalit (65.2% in Sudur Paschim and 64% in Karnali). Similarly, Pahadi Janajati/Indigenous Nationalities was found highest in Bagmati (60.6%) and Gandaki (46.4%) (Blitz & Humanity United, 2022).

A recent study on why people from different ethnic groups in Nepal migrate at different rates and to different destination has revealed that the historical legacy and human and economic capital are the key drivers of ethnic differences in out-migration. In this context, this study also revealed that contemporary discrimination may not be as important driver as the previous two (Williams et al., 2020). This seems to be obvious given that if discrimination was a major driver, Dalits would have migrated to a greater magnitude to a destination where such discrimination was not there. On the other hand, a large proportion of them migrate to India where caste-based discrimination is still there like in Nepal. Other studies also reveal this fact. For example, an longitudinal study conducted since the 1990 revealed that

³The per capita of the poorest group (1st consumption quintile) was Nepali Rs (NRs) 16,850, 2nd quintile (NRs) 24,582, 3rd quintile (lower middle class) NRs 34,154, 4th quintile (upper middle class) NRs 44,184, and the fifth quintile (richest or upper class) NRs 95,172 (CBS, 2012: 27).

⁴There are also categories within these groups in terms of hill and Terai (plain).

historical legacies of hill ethnic groups like Gurungs led them to their larger scale migration to Hong Kong and UK, and then their larger income from their work in the armies also helped their children to migrate to other developed countries like USA and Japan (Adhikari, 2001; Seddon et al., 2022). The migration of Brahmins and Chettris to developed countries is basically due to human and economic capital – higher income/wealth, education and social network with relatives and friends who had already migrated in such countries (Williams et al., 2020). The consequences of this migration trend also mean that there will be persistence of, or rather increase in, economic inequality. Therefore, if migration is taken as a way of enhancing prosperity of all, policy changes are also necessary so that disadvantaged and discriminated people can also participate in remunerative migration pathways.

5.8 Explaining Migration for Work from Nepal

As discussed above, we see that there are three main streams of emigration from Nepal to foreign countries for work. These three cases have to be looked at differently based on who participates in such migration, why they participate, and regulation and governance of cross-border migration. These three streams are: open migration to India, contract work in Malaysia, Gulf countries and other middle income countries, and migration to developed countries – Europe, Australia, Japan, and North America. Until now, the third stream is still small but it is growing faster. These migration streams require different theoretical perspectives to understand them.

5.9 Push and Pull Factors

Looking at the three streams of migration, ‘push and pull’ theory is largely used to explain why Nepalis migrate for work in foreign countries. Generally, push factors are considered responsible for migration to India as poorer migrants and migrants from the marginal and food scarce regions generally go to India for work as long-term migrant as well as temporary and seasonal migrants to earn some income to supplement food produced at home. Two provinces (Karnali and Sudur Paschim) located in mid-west and far-west, respectively, are the most food insecure and poverty ridden Provinces, and migration to India is the dominant form of migration in these regions. In 2020, Human Development Indexes (HDI) in these two provinces were 0.538 and 0.547 (Nepal’s HDI was 0.587). Poverty rate in these two Provinces – Karnali and Sudur Paschim – was 58.8% and 50.8% respectively in 2011, against the national average of 39.1% in that year. However, poverty rates estimated in 2014 showed some improvement in Sudur Paschim province (33.6%), but it was still 51.2% in Karnali. Nationally, it was estimated at 28.6% in 2014 (NPC, 2020: 26 Fig. 2.10). From these two Provinces, almost every household (except for a few

wealthy ones) has one or two family members having worked in India in the past or working now at least either as temporary migrant or as seasonal migrants. In fact, seasonal migration is very common here, which usually happens when there is slack in farm-work (Gill, 2001).

Poverty is also seen affecting migration. Even though, it creates a push factor for migration, a minimum income or economic status is also required for the households/people to initiate migration. Below that critical income, people cannot migrate. For example, a large study conducted in early 2000s revealed that poorest of the poor (bottom 20%) couldn't migrate to foreign countries including India (CBS, World Bank, DFID and ADB, 2006). The same conclusion was reached in another study conducted in the late 1990s (Adhikari, 2001). Even going to India requires some expenses (at least travel cost, communication cost, friendship network to host for the initial period and help in finding the work) even though it does not require other expenses like agent fees and cost of travel documents. So, very poor people cannot even migrate to India. This is seen in case of poorest people in Province 2, located in eastern Terai Nepal. As a Province, this is the poorest Province in Nepal with very low HDI of 0.51 in 2020 (NPC, 2020). But, this low HDI of the Province is a result of high level of inequality or disparity among different classes, and high level of gender disparity. High intensity of poverty among the poorer groups in this Province prohibited their migration to cities in Nepal or to India (Seddon et al., 2001). On the other hand, this Province also has higher level of migration to Gulf States and Malaysia, which is common among the middle-income groups.

Push factors also work differently for different groups of people. Role of poverty as a push factor and its inability to move people for migration when it (poverty) is critically high as discussed above is also revealed in another study (Shrestha, 2017). This study examined a shock to the push factors in the origin and its differential response to migration to various destinations. It revealed that such shocks in push factors affected different parts of the wealth distribution and different wealth group behaved differently in terms of their migration to different destination. The shock factors examined were increase in income due to rainfall (crop production) and increase in death due to political conflict. When the change in the first factor leads to an increase in income by \$ 100, it increases migration to India by 54%, but it has no effect on migration elsewhere. An increase in conflict, which creates income loss and amenity loss for wealthier households, increased migration abroad (other than India), especially from urban areas. The study reports "an increase in conflict intensity by one death per 1000 population increases international migration from urban areas by 3.1 percentage points which is equivalent to the effect of increasing household income by US\$ 420 in absence of conflict" (Shrestha, 2017: 3). The increase in growth in the construction and manufacturing sectors in the destination countries, particularly Malaysia and the Gulf countries was found to increase migration to these destinations (profitable migration) due to reduction in cost of migration. Therefore, 'pull' factors are important for initiating migration to profitable destinations for wealthier households, which take risks to take those opportunities.

For other two streams of migration, contract work in Malaysia and Gulf States and to developed countries, 'pull factors' are important. The migration to developed countries has been studied least because of small volume of migration. Until now, this has been a privilege of wealthy people because of high cost and higher professional (like nursing, medical and engineering) education required for migration. Studies have shown that income of migrants in countries other than India is significantly higher than what they would earn if they get a work. In case of India, the income is not that different than in Nepal in case people get a work. Therefore, there is no significant 'pull' effect. In other cases, a foreign migrant (Gulf and Malaysia) was found to earn Rs 34,871 per month (equivalent to \$328) in 2016, whereas per capita GDP in that year was Rs 86,000 (IMF, 2020). This means that those working in foreign countries can get as much as five times the income in Nepal – provided they get the work, but there is already high unemployment within the country. In another study conducted by Nepal Rastra Bank in 16 districts, average annual income of a youth in Nepal was found to be Rs 90,521, and that of a youth working in foreign country, as reported by his/her family members, was Rs.532,000. This shows that the annual income of someone working overseas was more than five times that of someone working in Nepal (Adhikari, 2017b).

Even though push factors are primary cause of migration to India of people from 'lower' economic background and marginal regions, there are also proximate factors facilitating these migrations. Because of these facilitating circumstances like open border (political relation) and historical-cultural ties, this neo-classical 'push-pull' explanation does not fully explain this migration. If Nepalis were tempted to migrate solely because of poor economic conditions and lack of opportunities (push factors) in the country of origin, this same country (Nepal) has also attracted a large number of Indians for work. As a matter of fact, more remittance goes to India from Nepal, then from India to Nepal. For example, in 2017, remittance worth 3.02 billion USD was sent from Nepal to India. On the other hand, remittance worth 1.02 billion USD was sent from India to Nepal in that year (Pew Research Center, 2019). The different regional and cultural areas of India and Nepal are interlinked in different ways so that some regions (states) in India (for example Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and Orissa) are more interlinked to Nepal than in India and so poorer people from these regions come to Nepal for work. On the other hand, geographical regions of Nepal like mid-west and far-west are more interlinked to some of the Southern States in India (like Maharastra and Karnataka) and hilly regions in India (like Utter Pradesh hilly region; northeast hills, and Himalayan region like Laddakh, Jammu, Kashmir) than other regions within the country. These corridors of migration between these countries have been created and shaped due to historically evolved interpersonal relationships based on culture, trust and traditional migration. This historical/cultural legacy has created and perpetuated a belief that Nepalis are good for security related jobs. This has created a demand for them in India. On the other hand, because urbanization and industrialization has taken place earlier in India than Nepal, some modern skills in both technical and marketing sectors have been more readily available to Indians. They have found that they can work in Nepal to utilize those skills.

The 'open border' between these countries that facilitated migration is a product of political/cultural relations as discussed above. Thus, the emphasis on differential (expected) wage rates in push-pull theory (Massey et al., 1993) is not completely applicable in this case. To explain migration from Nepal to India, Subedi (1991) uses a framework with four clusters of variables shaping international migration – differential variables (differences in wage, employment and price of land), spatial variables (distance and transportation costs), affinity variables (religion, culture, language and kinship networks) and access variables (rules for entry and exit). In the past, Nepalis went to India not solely because of wage differentials but mainly in the search for arable land as poor Nepalis denied access to land within Nepal because of exploitative agrarian relations of that time.

5.10 Other Explanations of Migration

Looking at the political-economic perspective from labor demanding countries, 'dual labor market theory' is another theory of migration that seeks to explain international migration (Massey et al., 1993). The need for foreign labor arises because labor market in industrialized destination countries is segmented into a capital intensive primary sector, which employs local people, and a secondary sector of labor intensive physical and less prestigious work which is done by people from poorer countries. The 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous and difficult) that Nepalis do, often with low wages, in foreign countries, can be explained by this theory. Foreign migrants perform such jobs for a number of reasons including the short-term and instrumental nature of their relationship with the jobs and the society. Once their goal is fulfilled (usually earning a certain amount of money), they leave the job. Therefore, these jobs do not form their identity.

There are also theories that explain why international migration is perpetuated. In Nepal's case, network theory and social capital theory have also been used to explain migration. Network theory explains that migration is perpetuated as migrants develop a network between labor sending and receiving countries, and those having a relation (through kinship, friendship, and shared community origin) with the migrant also migrate (Boyd, 1989). Therefore, every migrant is linked to non-migrants and this migration creates a pathway for others to migrate. For example, a study taking the case of Nepal reveals that the main outcomes of migration like increased financial capital, education of the children, migration specific knowledge, and increased social capital enlarges asset endowment and lowers both investment costs and risks involved in migration, which facilitates further migration (Thieme & Wyss, 2005; Wyss, 2004). Thieme uses the concept of 'social capital (networks of related persons)' to explain Nepalis migration to India, especially in determining where a migrant goes and what work he/she will do. Closely related to this argument is also a study that examined the relationship between ethnicity and migration pattern in Nepal (Williams et al., 2020). This study revealed that of the three mechanisms (educational and economic resources, contemporary

discrimination, and historical legacies of migration perpetuated through social networks) considered to explain the ‘destination choice’, first two were found to be important.

Considering that both private and government institutions (e.g. recruiting agencies, government departments, civil society, labor courts, welfare agencies, research agencies, policies etc. in both source and destination) are facilitating migration to other countries like Gulf States and Malaysia (where private agencies are crucial) and to countries like South Korea, Japan and Israel (where government also sends people as agreed between the governments), institutional theory (Massey et al., 1993; Massey, 2019) could also be relevant here. As Nepal’s migration to Gulf countries and other developed countries increased rapidly after change in government politics in 1990 with the institutionalization of democratic governance, institutional theory seems relevant to the extent that the government policies and institutions helped in this process. But then there are also other drivers of migration like historical legacies and social networks that helped in migration through information, sponsorship, support and the like.

Migration from Nepal has been a continuous process. It has also rapidly changed in line with the change in economy and society or broader process of development. It is seen that as the country has progressively developed, migration for work has also grown rapidly and in different ways making it difficult to have a comprehensive theory to explain this, which is a case in migration pattern generally (Castles & Miller, 2009). In recent studies, the role of aspirations in migration and migrant’s agency have also been emphasized (de Haas, 2021). It is because of this, a migrant makes many migration steps based on capability to reach an aspiration, which could also change along with development process. In this line, a recent study of Nepali migrants to Gulf countries revealed that migrants make many moves to reach to these countries (which are not desirable but affordable), and then this move again helps to move to other aspirational migration destination (Valenta, 2022).

5.11 Conclusion

Nepal has undergone a rapid shift in its migration pattern in the last three decades, which requires a complex set of theoretical perspectives to understand why migration for work in foreign countries have been taking place, and why this has been changing.

Even though, prior to 1990, Nepal’s migrants went mainly to India for work – which was facilitated by unique sets of political, cultural and historical incidences, now increasingly, Nepalis go to other countries for work. There are now three broad streams of migration – migration to India, migration to Gulf States and Malaysia, and migration to developed countries. As of now, the second stream is dominant and Nepal gets huge remittances from this stream of migration.

Migration to Gulf States and Malaysia, which now accounts a larger proportion of Nepalis who work outside the country and a larger proportion of remittances

entering Nepal, has recently evolved – after 1990, which coincides with opening of Nepal to outside world through a political change in 1990 and creation of new job opportunities in these countries through waves of globalization and industrialization. The need for low-cost labor with less political power for union-making and bargaining to sustain those industries or enterprises was a major reason for allowing foreign workers to work in these countries. Even though these opportunities had emerged somewhat earlier like late 1970s, Nepal is a latecomer in this field because of closed politics that discouraged its citizens to work outside the country. The unique case of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on migration and remittances reveal that these migration patterns can suffer serious challenge within no time if disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world.

Nepal's unique case of foreign labor migration over a period of about 250 years enriches our theoretical understanding of migration for work in foreign countries. The analysis clearly shows that a single theoretical lens is not enough to explain historical trend of migration or its contemporary nature. A nuanced analysis or perspective is required based on both internal and external political economy and internal social structure encompassing class, ethnicity, gender and regional perspective. For example, as this paper demonstrates different theoretical perspective is required to understand migration in these broad three streams of migration (to India, to the Middle East and Malaysia, and migration to developed countries). Similarly, it is seen that disasters of different types (like the Covid-19 pandemic) and how they shape migration are also to be integrated into theoretical perspective. Such attempts have been slow to come in migration research.

Understanding of why migration takes place and why certain migrants go to certain destinations and their problems and aspirations can help us in formulating policies that help these migrants to reach their aspirations in the migration process. As is seen in this paper, migrants face several challenges even though they constantly use their agencies to reach their aspirations in this regard. Problems like Covid pandemic and restrictive structure of the global order (like migration related policies and support for migrant workers) affected migrants and their movements. Removing those restrictive structures and increasing support mechanisms during difficult periods and crises would help migrants to fulfill their aspirations in their migration process.

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