

Nepali Migrant Porters in Sikkim

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Abstract: *India has remained a favoured destination of work for many migrants hailing from rural areas of far western and eastern Nepal. Among these migrants, there are some who move towards the larger metro cities in the heartland and others who travel to smaller hilly states to sell their labour. One such group are the Nepali immigrants working as porters in Sikkim. They have a historical presence and are deeply ingrained in the state economy. However, due to the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 signed between the two nations, they are classified as neither local nor foreign workers in India. Such ambiguity makes their labour status unclear and exposes them to exploitation, leaving them unprotected under labour laws. Despite facing several predicaments, these workers can exist in congruence with the host community and make a decent livelihood. The study views these migrants as social actors who can navigate through their adversities of working as unskilled labour in a politically debilitating set-up by utilising their social capital and forming social networks in everyday life to sustain themselves as well as remit to their families. The study uses primary data collected via an interview schedule with the Nepali migrants working as porters, as well as the members of the host area in Gangtok and Namchi districts of Sikkim. Secondary information is collected from relevant articles and journals.*

Keywords: Labour, migration, social capital, migration network.

Introduction

The Indo-Nepal corridor is one of the oldest migration corridors in South Asia, where accounts of people moving between the regions date back to 500 BC for the Trans-Himalayan trade (Schrader, 1988 as cited in Bashyal, 2021). In modern day, India and Nepal share a border of over 1850 km with five Indian states, namely, Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and

Uttarakhand. Owing to the Friendship Treaty of 1950 signed between the two nations, these borders are porous in nature and allow cross-border migration without any formal permits.

In the context of labour migration from Nepal to India, we see a large number of migrants coming predominantly from the high-poverty and food-insecure regions such as the hill and mountain areas of the mid-western, far-western and eastern Nepal mainly as unskilled migrant workers (Gautam, 2017). This population can be further divided into two groups, i.e., those who are employed as drivers, watchguards, domestic helps, in metro cities and those who engage in wage labour in the smaller hilly states of India.

In terms of the wage-earning group, studies have found that portering emerges to be an accessible occupation as it requires minimal skills and investment. Bruslé (2008) notes that, '*Once a migrant arrives in town, he can start working as a porter, with just a jute bag on his back to protect it and a strap to carry loads*'. It is not an entirely new job to venture into because wage work, such as portering labour, is one of several adaptive strategies by which rural households in Nepal supplement their subsistence agriculture (Malville, 2005). Scientifically, Nepali porters are renowned as the most efficient carriers in terms of bearing heavy loads. They have been found to carry up to 200% of their body weight even in steep ascents (Bastein et al., 2005). However, such an ability does not accord them any social prestige. On the contrary, a porter by definition carries '*someone else's burden*' which associates this work with stigma and depreciation, often operating in an exploitative arrangement. According to Dixit (1995), porters in Nepal occupy the lowest position in the labour hierarchy and make up the rural proletariat. Looking at their social position and the stigma attached to their profession, these Nepali migrant porters constitute the most vulnerable and marginalised labour migrant group.

The Indo-Nepal porous border situation is both a boon and a bane for those crossing it. On one hand, it allows people to seek livelihood opportunities across borders, while on the other, it creates a high-risk environment in the destination country due to a lack of documentation and safeguarding policies for the migrant population (Bruslé, 2008; Thieme, 2007; Bhattra, 2007; Bashyal, 2020). This is especially true for the unskilled migrants working as porters. Their underclass status and limited labour rights make them highly vulnerable to physical and psychological distress, exposing them to multiple

sources of exploitation (Samuels et al., 2011). Additionally, their undocumented nature often obscures their contribution towards the development of the host country as well as in their country of origin.

In this background, the given study revolves around understanding the case of migrant porters from Nepal working in Sikkim. It aims to understand the migration system between Nepal and Sikkim, which the migrants have kept alive using their social capital and social networks. It seeks to highlight how the migrants have used these soft resources to compensate for the absence of safeguarding measures for them. The study intends to reflect on their agency to establish themselves in the host area despite the threats posed by the precarity of their position.

Methodology

Given the dearth of literature on Nepali cross-border labour migration in Sikkim, this study is based upon an exploratory research design where primary data has been collected from the field during 2022-2023 using an interview schedule. Purposive sampling was done to select 25 male respondents from the two main districts of Sikkim, namely Gangtok and Gyalshing. Secondary data has been collected from literature review based upon cross-border migration from Nepal to India, followed by books and articles focusing on Social Networks among migrants.

Migrant Networks and Migration System

Migrant networks are sets of social ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin (Sha, 2021). These networks have a great impact on the process of migration as they provide the migrant with access to social capital, which is the resources of information and help that lower the cost and increase the benefits of migration (Garip & Asad, 2017). The study of such networks allows us to understand the migration process in action as experienced by the migrants in real time. Apart from the analysis of the migration network, we also have a complementary approach known as the Migration System approach, which attempts to move away from the deterministic attitude of the neo-classical approach and tends to question the agency of the migrant as a social actor and their role in the development of the migration process (Bakewell, 2013). Together, these

approaches give us an insight into the lives of migrants as social actors having agency and forming social ties, operating in their daily lives and thereby creating a system of migration which, in due course, becomes self-sustaining. Massey (1990) refers to this cycle as the ‘cumulative causation’ of migration, where he mentions that each act of migration leads to a series of changes in the sending community, and these changes make future migration more likely. Hence, understanding the everyday life of the Nepali migrants through the networks they build can aid in comprehending the nature of the migration system between Nepal and Sikkim.

Role of Migrant Networks

While migrant networks facilitate migration by providing migrants with access to information about the availability of jobs and conditions and the provision of material or social support, these networks may also play a vital role in deterring migration, especially of the new migrants, by initiating competition with one another over opportunities and resources (Blumenstock et al., 2023). According to Sha (2021), kinship-related networks can be particularly important in processes of irregular migration, providing undocumented migrants with knowledge about cheap and reliable brokers, ways to cross the borders without apprehension and how to avoid getting deported. Migrant networks like social networks are cultural resources based upon values such as trust, reciprocity, information and cooperation. It is one of the most important cultural resources which not only helps individuals and communities alike to develop, but it also greatly helps to resolve conflicts cooperatively and peacefully (International Relations and Security Network, 2006).

Nepali Migration in Sikkim

Nepali migration in Sikkim can be understood in three phases, first is the pre-colonial phase which includes the Gorkha invasion of Sikkim which took place during 1788, followed by the colonial phase i.e., after 1835 where the British administration processed mass mobilization of labour from Nepal to the sparsely populated Hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim to expedite the development of the region (Sinha, 2008). Finally, the third phase, i.e., the post-colonial phase, where we see the emergence of policies such as the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 and the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act of 1961, which has led to a new class of Nepali labour migration in Sikkim.

While the former promotes the free movement of people, goods and services across the borders between India and Nepal, the latter is put in place to deter the same. The purpose of introducing the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act was to distinguish between the ‘natives’ and ‘settlers’, in other words, the ‘citizens’ and the ‘migrants’ and therefore to curb immigration in the State (Vandenhelsken, 2020). According to the regulation, Sikkimese citizenship, known as the “Sikkim Subject”, would be conferred only to those who were domiciled (either born or settled in Sikkim) for a period of not less than fifteen years immediately before the Regulation. The criteria to be recognised as ‘domiciled’ were - having severed economic and nationality ties with another country, and having ‘immovable property’ in Sikkim. The majority of Bhutia, Lepcha and Limboo were granted domicile being the indigenous communities, whereas the landless and propertyless Nepalis were left out of it. The ‘Sikkim Subject’ status was defined as a prerequisite for Indian citizenship when Sikkim was legally integrated into the Indian Union as its twenty-second component state in 1975. Therefore, the population of the Nepali community living in Sikkim holding the Sikkim Subject document were deemed as Indians, and this sharply distinguishes them from the Nepalis of Nepal who continue to come to Sikkim in search of livelihood opportunities. The domiciled status of Nepalis of Sikkim also legally differentiates them from the Nepalis living in other parts of India.

Nepali immigration in the context of Sikkim may have slowed down due to the new democratic setup, but it remains a continuous process. Nepali migration to India, as in the case of Sikkim, has been strong because of the compact geographical nature of the region, socio-cultural continuity and easy accessibility (Upreti, 2002). A survey conducted by the Labour Department, Govt. of Sikkim¹, from 20th October 2020 to 30th April 2022, recorded 4478 foreign national workers in the unorganised sector, out of which 99.8% are from Nepal. Their population was found to be highest, at 81.6% in the East district, followed by West at 11.7%, North at 6%, and South at 1.2%. These numbers reflect only a minuscule portion of the Nepali migrants, as the survey was conducted only on a preliminary level.

Migrant Networks among the Nepali migrant porters in Sikkim: Field Experience

During the fieldwork, it was found that Nepali migrant porters are mostly engaged in construction sites, carrying heavy construction materials. They

also work in the market area, loading and unloading consignments of goods for shop owners, and occasionally sell their labour to any patron who requires their services.

It was interesting to note that despite their prevalence in Gangtok and Gyalshing for several decades, there were no labour organisations or associations that were functioning for their welfare. Many would take this as a mark for the absence of agency of these portering groups. However, upon close observation, it was revealed that despite the absence of any formal organisations, there was a particular social network in place, which was fuelled by the social capital of these migrants. By navigating these networks, the labour migrants were able to select their destination, find work and also remit back to their families.

In terms of choosing the destination for work

Nepal has a culture of migration, where migrating out of one's village in search of work is considered to be a rite of passage from boyhood to adulthood. Terms like *Kamaune*, which is related to the 'breadwinner', is often used in this context (KC, 2014). There also exists a culture among the young boys where they take migration as an adventure to leave the mundanity of their village life behind and explore new places and find work simultaneously. The term *Ghum-Phir* was used by the respondents, which loosely translates to the act of venturing out and touring new places. While the culture of migration exists, the decision to migrate and the choice of destination are heavily dependent upon friends or relatives in the destination. Out of the 20 respondents, each one had selected Sikkim as a destination because they already knew a person who was working in Sikkim, who helped them cross the Sikkim border. All respondents had crossed the border check post with either their relatives or friends when they travelled to Sikkim for the first time. In fact, it was the earlier migrants who tutored the new ones on how to dress and how to talk when accosted by the border authorities. One of the respondents said that his friend taught him the trick to remove his Nepali *Dhaka Topi* (cap) at the check post so as not to raise suspicion. The cap is a significant indicator of a person belonging to the Nepali community and would attract unnecessary attention from the border patrol.

In terms of finding accommodation in the initial days

One of the major advantages for a Nepali migrant working in Sikkim is the cultural affinity, as Nepali is also the lingua Franca of the State. It is, therefore, relatively easier for the migrants to assimilate into the host environment. However, despite this condition, it is still extremely challenging for a Nepali migrant to find work and affordable housing before they deplete their resource. In this scenario, it was found that all the respondents stayed a minimum of one month with the other earlier migrants until they could manage accommodation of their own. They were not expected to pay the rents immediately, but were given a grace period of up to three months, after which they would pay their share. Although the living conditions were deplorable in terms of sanitation and other basic amenities, the respondents expressed a sense of relief and safety that the other mates came from the same market situation and found the environment like a 'second home'. In Gangtok, it was found that a Nepali migrant couple had rented five rooms in which they were sub-renting more than 30 Nepali porters without the knowledge of the landlord. This couple also operated a kitchen where the food suited the palates and the pockets of the migrants. One respondent said that having the food there gave them more time on their hands to work and thus earn more money. The kitchen also allowed for a credit system, which no other eatery would offer to the Nepali migrant group, mainly due to the circular pattern of migration and undocumented status.

In terms of finding work

It was found that Nepali porters work in groups; the formation of this group depended upon the proximity of their living quarters. Those porters who belonged to the same areas in Nepal stayed in rented rooms in proximity to each other and also worked together. The main working hour for larger work consignments related to construction material and market goods takes place between 4 am and 7 am in the morning so the groups with larger members are selected to complete the work efficiently within the given time. These porters are not employed; rather, each porter groups have one main person for contact via whom they find work daily. It is this person who acts as a group representative and ensures the strength of the group is maintained at all times and that all members can find work. The porters then collect a nominal fee, which they then submit to this representative. This person was an early migrant, having multiple sources of contact and

good relations with the business owners from the host community. After the morning carriage session, the porters find work individually by cruising the market area or waiting in the labour spots.

These labour spots have a unique characteristic of their own. Usually located in the busy areas, these spots become spaces for the porters to congregate while they wait for work. It allows them to discuss politics, finances and news from back home, thereby adding to their transnational character. A respondent said that if one needs to know about the gossip in town, they must visit these circles where men talk about 'everything under the sun'. Many new migrants find these spots beneficial to visit, as they are able to make new acquaintances and increase their chances of finding work.

Saving and sending remittance

Gangtok has recently introduced the money transfer facility through the International Monetary Exchange Centres. This has made the process of remitting easier for the porters who do not have any bank accounts in India. As opposed to earlier, when they had to physically carry the money with them at all times and risk it being taken away by the border administration. Fortunately, they can now wire the money to Nepal by transferring it via the IME centres. While many have been able to take advantage of this facility, there are some Porters who belong to some of the most remote villages in the eastern parts of Nepal, where banking services have not been introduced yet. They have resorted to depositing their hard-earned money with the shop owners where they work or send it through a fellow migrant from their village or locality. On average, a porter remits Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000 in approximately three months; this earning is spent towards their children's education and household expenses. Upon asking the respondents about the security of such a mode of remittance, they replied, '*Bishwas nai sabai bhanda bardi ho hamro kam ma*', meaning 'trust is everything in our kind of work'. It clearly reflected the confidence they had in their friends and some of the members in the host area. This network is solely based on trust and friendship and has worked out well for the respondents.

Fictive Kinship among the migrants and the members of the host area

The porters who live in proximity to each other and work together are

found to refer to each other via kinship terms such as ‘*mama*’, ‘*kaka*’, which gives them a sense of community and support. While the labour migrants from other parts of India are found to refer to their patron as ‘*malik*’, the Nepali porters refer to their patrons through kinship terms like ‘*barda*’, ‘*bardi*’, ‘*bhanji*’, which instils the we-feeling among the hosts and migrants. Two of the respondents who have been living in the same rented building for over 10 years in Gangtok refer to their landlady as ‘*ama*’. In fact, many of them have acquired Indian SIM cards via their neighbours and employers with whom they share these fictive kinship ties. Possessing these Indian SIM cards allows them to access the internet and have a free flow of communication with their families back in Nepal, among other benefits.

In cases of illness and Death in the host area

Since the porters are not eligible for any health insurance or benefits in the state, it becomes extremely difficult and a costly affair if they fall ill or even injure themselves. Such set setback could make a migrant lose their monthly saving and, in some cases, enter into cycles of debt. One of the respondents informed that while de-loading glass from the lorry to the warehouse, the strap accidentally broke, causing the glass sheet to fall on the back of his leg. He was admitted to the state hospital for six months. During this time, the other porters from his group collected money to finance his recovery. Another respondent shared his account of contracting Tuberculosis when he had initially migrated to Gangtok. He was greatly helped by his landowner, as he did not have anyone from his family who could take care of him. Although he cannot repay the favour in cash, he makes sure to give his services to the landowner whenever possible in free of cost.

An interesting account was shared by another respondent who has lost his brother to alcoholism in Gangtok. Since they did not have any kind of documents to prove their status as workers it was impossible to take the corpse back to Nepal without being apprehended by the border administration. He narrated, ‘It was a difficult and scary situation, I did not know what to do, but the other porter brothers helped me to find a way to cremate my brother here, and even though it was done in a very basic way, I could conduct the final rites for him.’

Conclusion

Studies have shown a few associations being formed among the Nepali migrants living in Delhi, mainly focusing on savings and credit systems known as *Cits* and *Sosatis*, which functioned independently from any financial authority of India or Nepal (Theime, 2007). However, no such association has been able to be formed in Sikkim mainly because portering is a precarious job and the migrants practice seasonal migration, so they could leave the State anytime without any trace. The Nepali migrants play a very important role in the development of the state as they are the only ethnic group who are able to carry heavy loads in the hilly terrain of the state. They have been characterised as loyal, industrious and trustworthy workers. Their role has also been very crucial for the upliftment of their country, as remittances make up 27% of Nepal's GDP. Despite their continuous efforts, these Nepali Migrants in India have been overlooked by the policymakers of both countries. Recently, in 2022, Namchi District started the enumeration of migrant labourers in their jurisdiction, where they have also included the Nepali porters. A sum of four hundred rupees is collected from all the migrants, and then a green vest and a labour number are given to the migrants. Wearing this vest is made mandatory. This operation is looked after by the police department of Sikkim, and we are still unclear if it will result in any friendly policies towards these migrants. The Labour Department in Gyalshing district had initiated record keeping of the Nepali migrant porters under the Sikkim Labour Protection Act 2005; however, this practice was discontinued after the amendment of the Act in 2021. The issue of granting work permits to Nepali migrants directly clashes with the issue of citizenship in India, as the authorities fear that migrants may use work permits to naturalise as Indian citizens.

The migrants, with their extensive social network and social capital, have so far sustained their presence in Sikkim. However, with the ambiguous status of the Nepali labour migrants in India and the lack of parallel provision to address the bilateral treaty, the crisis of livelihood still looms heavily over them.

Note

1. Gaz. No. (sikkim.gov.in).

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