

STRUGGLE OF NEPALESE MIGRANTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This article describes the situation of Nepalese migrants working in Indian cities in the context of covid-19. Cessation of cross border movement between Nepal and India is not a matter of imagination in usual situations but that was the case during unusual period of March and April because of covid-19. The migrants who wanted to return home from India had to struggle a lot and to face many challenges during their journeys. This study was conducted to describe changes observed in the process of migration during the period of covid19. Data were collected using the techniques of direct observations, phone and Facebook messenger conversations as primary source of information as well as monitoring news and social media as secondary sources. An exploratory analysis has been carried out to describe the situation faced by during their travels. Findings are presented under the topics: mode of travel, views about working in India, reasons for returning India. It was found that the migrants faced difficult situation during their return journeys and had to spend time and money 5 times more than that in normal situation. From the observations, it can be concluded that Nepali migrants from Sudurpaschim province prefer to go to India because they get a range of jobs from manual, clerical to managerial compared to the opportunities for skilled-based jobs in Nepali market. Therefore, it is recommended to increase investments in skill development activities to retain human resources in the country.

Keywords: Nepal-India Migration, COVID-19, Lockdown, Migrants

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, India is the famous and convenient labour market for the people of Sudurpaschim Province; estimated 5,00,000 people from this province are believed to be working in India. Most of Nepali migrants are engaged in jobs from service sectors and agriculture but some also work in construction work, and production industries. Generally, large number of rural hills residents of Sudurpaschim Province go to India to find jobs because of shorter distances and less investments compared to going a third country. Nepali migrants prefer to go to big Indian cities travelling longer distances. This is perhaps due to established contacts and existing linkages at destinations. The main destinations in India are Delhi, Mumbai, Gujrat, Bangalore, Kerala, Pune, Ludhiana, Amritsar, and the hill towns of Almoda, Nainital, Shimla and Pithoragarh (Basyal, 2014). Generally, the migrants leave their homes after mid-November (Tihar) and return mid-April (New Year).

This study indicates that there are a lot of opportunities for skilled workers but due to lack of these skills Nepalis are forced to go to India to find difficult manual works. On average, the rate of India migration is slightly declined due to emergence of new labour market in this province but it remains constant in case of hill areas (Bhatt, 2015). Gill (2003) urged that both the push factors (high level poverty and food insecurity) and pull factors (seasonal employment

opportunities elsewhere) are responsible for India migration. Food insecurity, unemployment and lack of opportunities were significant push factors for Nepal to India migration (ICIMOD, 2010).

Watchman (Guards) or hotel workers are major jobs for Nepalis in India (Donini et al., 2013). Mostly male were employed as restaurant/bar workers, watchman and factory workers and female migrants work as a house maids (Samuels et al., 2011). Various studies found that Nepali labour migrants in Indian cities can earn an average of IRS 10,000 (136 USD) per month.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Although the first case of novel corona virus was detected on 13 January 2020 in Nepal, India reported the first case 17 days after Nepal. The first death from Covid -19 was detected on 12 March 2020 in India and only two months after (14 May 2020) in Nepal. Consequently, Nepal enforced nationwide lockdown from 24 March with an objective to prevent its spread in population. On the other hand, India declared a nationwide lockdown on 25 March for 21 days which was extended till the end of May 2020. But Nepal lifted the lockdown only on 15th June 2020. These mobility restriction resulted negative consequences to economy and affected severely to the people rely on wages and temporary jobs including the migrant workers (Yadav and Priya 2020). In addition to these consequences, there was additional implication to cross-border migration. Although there were limitations on covid-19 testing in Sudurpaschim province, the official first case was detected on 27 March 2020(2076 Chaitra 14: <https://www.reportersnepal.com/2020/07/448123>) and the patient was a migrant worker returned from India(Reporters Nepal, 2020). This led further enforcement of new rules regarding travel, testing and quarantine. After a series of protests and demands, the government temporarily opened borders gradually. But due to limited transportation allowed to operate within the country, onward travel was not very easy. During the period of Covid19, it was very difficult for Nepalis to travel home. Although the borders were locked, Nepali migrant workers from Indian cities were still arriving. This article describes the situation of Nepalese returnee migrants from working in Indian cities in the context of covid-19. This study also briefly touches those Nepali migrants who once abandoned the idea of going to India but reconsidered to do so because of unemployment in Nepal.

METHODS

This paper aims to describe the situation of migrant workers during COVID-19 period. A qualitative case study method of research design was used to obtain information about returnee migrants on: 1) mode of journey to home from India, 2) views about going back to India at the time of return and 3) reasons for returning back to India again after few months. Primary as well as secondary data were used for understanding and analyzing the problems. A convenience sampling method was used to include respondents via phone contact as well as using Facebook messenger. Face-to-face contact was avoided following the government's guidelines. Therefore, five respondents representing different states of India were selected for Mumbai (Maharashtra), Delhi, Champawat (Uttarakhand), Hariyana and Punjab. Secondary information was obtained from government institutions i.e. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law (Sudurpaschim province) and BhimDatt Municipality including news/social media. Information was collected using unstructured checklist of topics of interest. Secondary information from all four land-entry check points was obtained from Gauriphantā, Gaddāchauki, Jhulaghāt and Dārchulā. Some

respondents were contacted in Nepal during their journey from destination to origin. Furthermore, the researcher observed the quarantine shelters made for the respondents. Qualitative case study methodology was applied for analysis because it enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of people's experiences within specific situations. The following research questions were considered for data collection.

- How did migrants cross the border (How did they arrive/return their origin from destination)?
- What did migrants think about their jobs during their return period (Feelings whether they return or not?)
- Why are so many Nepalese return to India again even in COVID period?

This study was supported by Ministry of Internal Affair and Law (Sudurpaschim province), and approved by Far-Western University and BhimDatt Municipality and conducted as part of ongoing doctoral research of the author. All the participants provided informed consent before data/information collection.

RESULTS

This study found that a total of nearly 128,000 people returned from India during the period of covid-19 lockdown; of which 86% were the residents of sudurpaschim province while only 17,400 people from other provinces returned from these 4 border points of this province. These four border points lie in the districts Kailali, Kanchanpur, Baitadi and Darchula and these migrants from the first three districts (Kailali, Baitadi and Kanchapur respectively) comprised over 51% of total returnees. Gauriphanta was the most popular entry point for returnees of all districts of Sudrupaschim province except Jhulaghat for Baitadi. But Gaddachauki entry point was found to be popular for the returnees from other provinces 78% used this point to enter (Table 1). Overall 65% of returnees used Gauriphanta entry point.

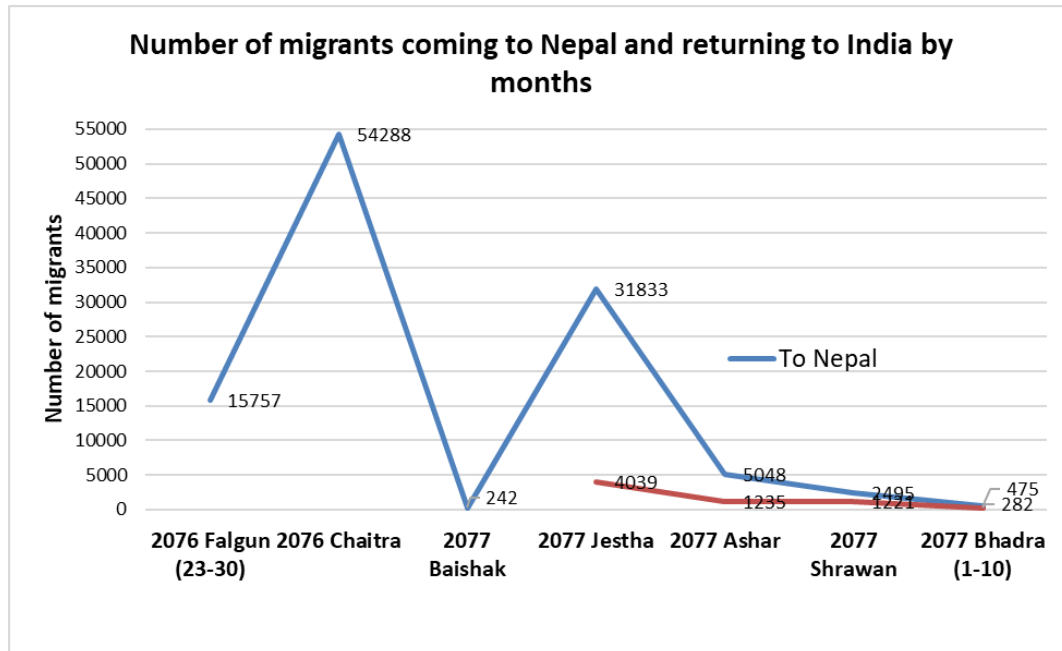
Table: Scenario of Returnee Migrants during Lock down period

S.N	District/Borders	Gauriphantā (Kailali)	Gaddāchauki (Kanchanpur)	Jhulaghāt (Baitadi)	Dārchulā	Total
1	Kailali	28,453	3,178	42	109	31,782
6	Baitadi	5,894	1,559	11,758	628	19,839
2	Kanchanpur	7,627	6,303	31	28	13,989
4	Doti	13,304	215	1	9	13,529
5	Achham	9,161	1,562	9	56	10,788
3	Dadeldhura	5,416	1,063	10	31	6,520
9	Bajura	4,209	1,646	43	2	5,900
8	Bajhang	3,989	625	319	346	5,279
7	Darchula	1,176	798	82	734	2,790
	<i>Sudurpaschim province total</i>	<i>79,229</i>	<i>16,949</i>	<i>12,295</i>	<i>1,943</i>	<i>110,416</i>
10	Other Provinces	3,437	13,656	152	186	17,431
	<i>Total returnees</i>	<i>82,666</i>	<i>30,605</i>	<i>12,447</i>	<i>2,129</i>	<i>127,847</i>
	From 2076Falgun to Chaitra 10	50,511	64,171	Not open	Not open	114,682
	Total Population	133,177	94,776	12,447	2,129	242,529

Source: Province Government, Ministry of Internal Affair and Law, Sudurpaschim Province

When looking into the data from 2076 Falgun 23 to 2076 Chaitra 10, the data is available for only Gauriphanta and Gaddachauki entry points. During the period the border points Jhulaghat and Darchula were not opened. According to available figures, 56% of those who returned

during this period used Gaddachauki entry point while remaining 44% used Gauriphanta. But the distribution of those returnees by destination district is not available. The entry points Jhulaghat and Darchula were opened for short time. The following table describes the number of migrants coming to Nepal and returning to India by months during and post-lockdown from the border:



The following sections describe the information obtained from the returnee migrants addressing the researching questions mentioned above.

STRUGGLE TO CROSS THE BORDER

Migration itself is not the simple process. Labour migration is the major livelihood option in the rural mid and far western Nepal. There may be several causes for migration. According to the opinions of the migrants, they faced various problems during pandemic. It was very painful for returnee migrants. It is because lockdown was announced without any pre-information. It was announced for only seven days for the first time when lockdown was started (Chaitra 11, 2076). But it was extended for week then a month and continued for long time (i.e. for 5 months). During that time, it was hard for the migrants to predict the duration of lockdown and hence could not decide to return on time. Most of migrants were predicting normal life soon, but things went against of their prediction. It was continuously prolonged adding difficulties to lives. At this point, most of companies, hotels were closed and people started losing their jobs. They didn't have money for food or travel cost for return.

An example shared by two sibling migrant working in New Delhi, could not return to home to meet their sick mother due to Covid-19 and later got message of her death by phone. They could not join the funeral rituals of their mother and mourned with limited choice at their rented room in New Delhi. It was unexpected moment for the brothers for two reasons: firstly no one expected the amount of mobility restriction which was caused by covid-19 and the other was the illness of their mother. Usually they did not return home in the month of March before.

Migrants explained their struggle during the days of complete lockdown in New Delhi when they run out of food stocks and all grocery stores were closed. They awful situation when the

employers also closed their businesses resulting interruption to the income. It was very painful where there was no one to support those workers.

When they ran out of food and money, they had to rely on food provided by charities for 15 days which was lifesaving but there was panic of corona infection. During such situation it was very difficult to maintain and follow the traditional rituals for purity during the demise of their mother. The brothers had to borrow money for buying clothes and other expenses. Sadly, they had to complete 12 days' rituals in three days before leaving for home behind a lorry paying INRs 9,000 along with other 30 fellow passengers and travelled to Paliya (near Kailali border) without food during the whole journey. With a lot of struggle, the siblings crossed India borders and only arrived home (Baitadi) only on the second day of arriving at Gauriphanta border. It was painful when they were asked to stay for next 14 days in a quarantine built in a nearby school. However, they joined final crematory rituals of their mother but another shock when the brothers staying in quarantine tested positive for corona virus. They were planning to go back to India again because they did not see any prospects in Nepal. They will resume tailoring and dressmaking job in India to earn about INR 10,000 monthly. They told the researcher that they would have preferred to stay in Nepal if they were able to earn NR 15,000 which is not possible at current time. It looks like they were force to forget all the struggles they faced to cross borders to come home.

Above all, there were no proper social distance measures in places and the state of sanitation and hygiene (i.e. Toilet, and Water) was also not adequate. Overall, the two-day long stay at the border entry point was looking poorer than India.

FEELINGS OF MIGRANTS DURING RETURN TIME

All the migrants told that they were feeling very tired because of long and difficult journey from their origin cities in India. However, it was observed that they were also looking happy and hopeful to have arrived to the motherland. Many of them were also hoping that they were safe now. They put tika of soil of their mother land. The returnees have a strong feeling of commitment to do something in Nepal; many were describing the pain they had to suffer after the occurrence of Covid-19 pandemic in India. The livelihood of people was heavily affected at their places of work and during the return journey home. Some of them told that they are not going to India again for working because they were hoping to work hard and find opportunities in Nepal. Similarly, some of them did not have clear plans for near future; because they thought that was not the right time to plan future as they have just arrived home country. The opinions of those who were working in better positions and attractive jobs in India were also not very much willing to go back because they had suffered a lot of pain since this covid19 pandemic hit India.

During conversations with them and our observations, it was seen that all of the returned migrants were looking relieved and very much pleased to have stepped into the territory of motherland. It was surprising to see happy faces despite of any proper assistance and humanitarian support offered to make their arrival comfortable. Easy access to transportation to their villages was also not in place. They had to make further trips without the proper obeying safety measure in terms of distance maintaining. These factors already started causing concerns to many of those returnees who were happy a short time ago. At their villages or quarantines established by the governments, it was observed that the migrants were seen differently for example as if all were covid19 infected persons. Their close family members i.e. children and spouse were also not coming near to them. Despite of this many felt safe and

secure in their mother land. So, this feeling of "home" was predominated most of other things, may be because it was very big struggle to arrive Nepal.

CAUSES OF RETURN (MIGRATION) DURING COVID AND BEHIND

The same people returned home with so much hope after suffering a very painful journey started lining up to go back to India again just after three months of their return. According to many of them, who we met at different border points, they were forced to rethink their own decision within a short time. They told there was problem for hand and mouth. Due to the effects of lockdown in Nepal, means of economic activities were closed.

On the other hand, those who had access to Indian Adhar Card also decided to return to India; Adhar Card was helpful for them to go back as the lockdown was relaxed in India. Those migrants who were supported by their employers in India were also among many of leaving Nepal. Many of them were going to India in a hope that there are bigger opportunities because many Nepalese has returned home and there is need of workforce. The above were some pulling and pushing factors; additional push factors included uncertainty of regular job opportunities in Nepal when needed. Some had to go back as they were in contact with their employers; if they do not go when they were called there was a risk of losing job.

From India, the numbers of covid19 cases were continuously rising, but Nepalese migrant workers are choosing to go back and take risk amidst rising toll of pandemic. Nepal relaxed the lockdown in mid-June when maximum number of Nepalis returned to India but it was observed that Indian workers entered Nepal only after July. Some of the Indian migrants crossed the border from unusual crossing points. They used to short way that was entranced from Khatima-Dodhara, Tanakpur-Bramdev, Belouri, etc. Generally, these borders are not commonly used.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to Thieme, migration is a cross-cultural and historical phenomenon that contributes to people's livelihoods between India and Nepal (Thieme, 2006). Where Gill (2003) urged that seasonal labour migration in Nepal occurs both from push factors (high level poverty and food insecurity) and pull factors (seasonal employment opportunities elsewhere). Wage rates in India are significantly higher than in Nepal (Specially in non-agriculture sectors) but Haas, 2000 mentioned that the migration takes place due to so many reasons such as conflict, political and social instability, and economic incentives (Haas, 2000). Large number of rural hills residents of Sudurpaschim Province go to India to find jobs because of shorter distances and less investments compared to going a third country.

The situation was unusual for the migrants which are observed rarely. Nepali migrant workers have to face problems during the covid19 pandemic because of many reasons; one of them was long distance of working destination. During the period of Covid19, it was very difficult for Nepalis to travel home; however, Indian migrants took benefit of shorter distance and easily returned. Although the borders were locked, Nepali migrant workers from Indian cities are still coming home. On the other hand, those Nepali who abandoned the idea of going India are again considering going back because of unemployment in Nepal. In contrast, there are a lot of tasks have been halted due to lack of skilled workers i.e. barbers, masons, carpenters, auto-mechanics, and brick makers. In case of Indian, they have planned to return immediately after open the situation. The Indian migrant workers in Sudurpaschim come from rural areas of neighbouring States of Uttar Pradesh or Uttarakhand. They arrived their home land without any problems because of shorter distance. Large population of Indian labour workers came from adjacent

districts of Nepali border areas (Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar). They back to India within the day and directly they were success to arrive their home town without delay. So, they didn't face any struggle.

If we ignore the details and degree of effects, the migrant workers from both countries were the group of people who were affected by the lockdown imposed in March 2020. Many faced additional problems because they thought the lockdown would not last for long and did not leave their places. Those who had to leave with families were also difficult to manage. By the time they arrived on Indo-Nepal border, Nepal government had enforced strict lockdown and Nepalese had to stay in no-man's-land longer in difficult condition.

This study indicates that there are lots of opportunities in Indian market from skilled work but due to lack of skill manpower Nepalis are forced to go to India to find difficult manual works. Consequently, Indian workers send bigger amount of remittances to India compared to what Nepalese earn in India. It was also observed that Nepalese migrants are highly hesitant to do in Nepal the same job what they doing in India. Also, Nepalese migrants lack skills i.e. barber, bricklayer, carpenter, mason, welder and mechanics etc. that Indian workers bring with them. The findings propose recommendations to revise policies related to migrant workers and investments in skill development activities to retain human resources and to stop remittances going out. The findings propose recommendations to revise policies related to migrant workers and investments in skill development activities to retain human resources and to stop remittances going out.

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