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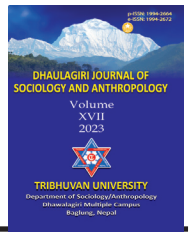
Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology



In Search of Better Options: An Ethnographic Inquiry of Migrants from Bharse, Gulmi, Nepal

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Article Info
Received: August 25, 2024
Revised received: December 22, 2024
Accepted: December 23, 2024
Available online: December 31, 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v18i2.73289

Abstract

This is an extended abstract of my doctoral research, which explored the experiences of migrants seeking better opportunities both within their community of origin and beyond. It examined how migrants sought better opportunities in their community of origin and established their social positionality in new cultural contexts while navigating opportunities, challenges, and future aspirations that have received little academic attention. The purpose was to uncover how migrants faced challenges and developed strategies for the future as they pursued better prospects across multiple locations. To understand this phenomenon, four research questions: a) how do migrants experience detachment while maintaining social networks with their community of origin? b) how do they establish their positionality in new communities? c) how do they perceive both opportunities and constraints? and d) how do they develop strategies for the future? were formulated. Drawing on relevant literature, I used structuration and social capital theories to interpret the stories of migrants from Bharse who have settled in Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London. I employed an ethnographic approach within the interpretative paradigm. The findings indicated that, whether in their community of origin or destination, migrants consistently seek better options for an improved life. My research results will be useful to researchers, policymakers, think tanks, students, and academics who are focused on migration issues.

Keywords: search, better, migrants, origin, recipient

Setting the Research Context

In this abstract, I derived key ideas from my doctoral research and tailored them to enhance their relevance to the study of migrants. The study focused on the small village of Bharse in Gulmi District of Nepal, from which some migrants relocated to Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London in search of better options. Nonetheless, humankind's formal and informal search for better options across various global destinations is a fundamental human trait. This phenomenon occurs both within and outside the country. In the context of Nepal, internal migration is also significant, as people from the mountains, hills, and villages relocate to urban areas, leaving their home villages depopulated. At this juncture, the lasting purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of migrants seeking better options within their community of origin and beyond, focusing on recipient communities and examining how they establish their social positionality in these new environments while navigating opportunities, challenges, and future aspirations. The literature indicates that the subjective premises of studying migrants have received little academic attention (Belinschi & Fidrmuc, 2018), which is an area of unexplored academically. In addition, only a few studies (Bauloz et al., 2020; Huot, 2017; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2018) on migrants have employed

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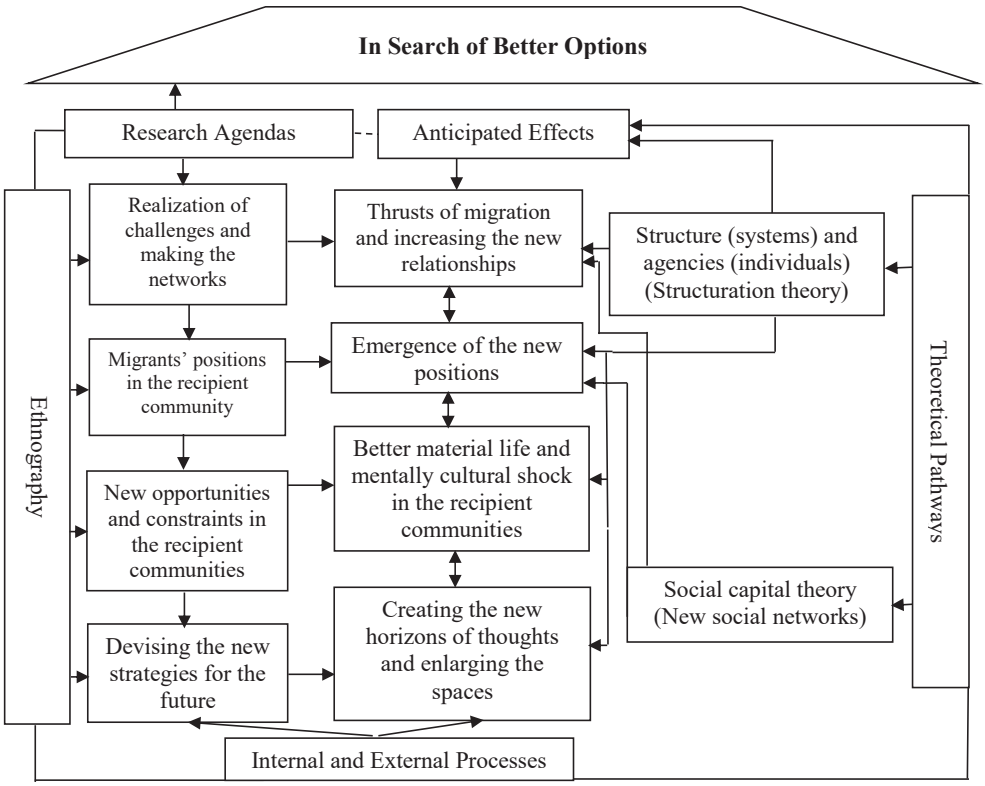
Figure 1

Framework of Research Continuum



Source: Coleman (1988), de Haas (2014), Giddens (1986), Lee (1966), Putnam (2000), and Subedi (1993)

ethnographic methods specifically, and qualitative research methods more generally, within the framework of the interpretative paradigm. The four research questions were: a) why migrants search for better options from their community of origin, how they harness networks with recipient communities, b) how they establish their positionalities in these new cultural contexts, c) how they navigate the opportunities and constraints they face, and d) how they develop their future strategies in seeking better opportunities further? In all conditions of people, migration is a human pursuit of searching for better options, both within and beyond current communities (Graauw, 2019; Subedi, 1993). This research adds value to the field of migration and opens new avenues for researchers, policymakers, think tanks, students, and academics to think about why and how migrants usually search for better options.

In my doctoral research, I employed Anthony Giddens' (1986) structuration theory and the social capital theories of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) to analyze and interpret data from migrants from Bharse, who have relocated to Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London. Specifically, using structuration theory, I explore how existing systems (structures) influence migrants (agency) and, conversely, how these migrants shape their positions within these systems. Additionally, I applied social capital theories to examine how migrants from Bharse built networks connecting their community of origin to recipient communities and how they developed new networks where they now live.

Methodological Approaches

Within the framework of the interpretative paradigm, I used ethnographic methods specifically and qualitative methods more generally to provide a contextual understanding of migrant studies, as noted by Taylor et al. (2012). Similarly, I employed multiple techniques - interviews, observations, and virtual methods - to gather information on migrants (hereafter referred to as research participants) within the framework of ethnographic principles. In this extended abstract, I have woven the migrants' stories based on five research participants, such as Mr. Himal, Mr. Pahad, Mr. Khola, Ms. Akash, Mr. Balawan, and Mr. Kriti based on the criterion sampling principle (Creswell, 2013), as I used pseudonyms of these research participants throughout this extended abstract to protect their identities, following the guidance of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007).

I primarily gathered information from migrants from Bharse[1] who, after leaving their community of origin, now

1. Bharse is a small hilly village of Gulmi District in Lumbini Province of western Nepal, which has become a laure migrant village. In recent years, this village experiences a rapid migration making this village emptied.

reside in various locations such as Butwal[2], Kathmandu[3], Hong Kong[4], and London[5] (referred to as the research fields) during 2015 and 2016, with updates provided as of the present. As Piacenti et al. (2014) and Zichner et al. (2014) claimed that ethnographers use the term 'research fields', as these research fields serve as avenues of information. I applied descriptive analysis and interpretation of the text to derive meanings, as noted by Creswell and Creswell (2023). In this context, I presented a research continuum, illustrating how migrants search for better options both within and outside their community of origin. Figure 1

Migrants' Perceptions of Detachment from the Community of Origin

Multiple push factors drive migration. For some migrants, the hardship experienced in their community of origin is one factor. I observed that some people from Bharse faced challenges they could not overcome, and seeing little hope for improving their living conditions, they migrated. In this context, I present the story of Mr. Himal (male, 66), who has lived in Butwal for more than four decades. Meeting him in Butwal was fortunate, as he was one of the oldest migrants to leave Bharse. I had planned to meet him. After confirming a time over the phone, I arranged a meeting for the afternoon. Upon arriving at his home, he introduced me to his family members. While enjoying snacks, I shared my research agenda, and he recounted his experiences and the difficulties he faced in Bharse; *the harsh living conditions forced me to leave my home village.* The challenges Mr. Himal faced in his community of origin acted as a push factor, which aligns with Lee's (1966) push and pull theory. As life became increasingly difficult, he searched for alternatives and found migration as a means to escape from the challenges. To support this, I incorporated Giddens' (1986) structuration theory, which suggests that structures are composed of systems where some individuals may feel challenged while others may not.

During my second field visit in late December of the same year, Mr. Himal and I agreed to meet at a teashop near his house. Our conversation flowed easily, as I had already explained the research's purpose. He shared how he developed networks with relatives and acquaintances who helped him settle in Butwal. Using my research tools - recorder, pen, and notebook, I carefully noted his verbatim responses. As he urged*; my relatives and fellow villagers helped me prepare and present myself in front of the Galla*[6]. The Laure tradition in Bharse compelled Mr. Himal to leave the village. If a young boy did not join the British, Indian, or Singapore armies, he was considered a coward within the community. His social and economic standing would also be lower, making it difficult to secure a desirable bride. As a result, boys from the village, including Mr. Himal, felt obligated to enlist in one of these military contingents. Mr. Himal was eager to join any of those. However, the first preference was typically the British contingent, followed by the Singapore contingent, with the Indian contingent as the third option. As Mr. Himal interestingly added; *my connections with relatives, fellow villagers, and acquaintances helped me settle in Butwal.* After failing to join the Indian contingent, Mr. Himal considered returning to the village, but his social networks encouraged him to stay in Butwal. He also received vital support from relatives, fellow migrants, and acquaintances.

I planned to meet another migrant, Mr. Pahad (male, 44), who also resides there. His story is equally compelling. We agreed to meet at his residence. Following a formal exchange of greetings, I began discussing my student days before transitioning to the main topic of our conversation. I explained the purpose of my visit and the reason for meeting him. Mr. Pahad warmly welcomed my research interests, and I fostered an open environment where he could speak freely and without hesitation. As he shared; *I had some exposure to new places, allowing me to compare my living conditions with those of other communities, the factors that influenced me to leave Bharse.* This excerpt reveals that Mr. Pahad had the opportunity to visit other places and observe different ways of life, which gradually led him to detach from Bharse, his community of origin. He recognized better opportunities for health, education, transportation, communication, and market access elsewhere, prompting him to leave his home

2. Butwal is also a business hub and one of the main cities of Lumbini Province of western Nepal. People from the northern part mostly come down to Butwal to settle. Quite a many migrants from Bharse also live there.

3. Kathmandu is the capital city of Nepal where some migrants from Bharse settled. For migrants, it is also a transit point to move within and outside the country.

4. Hong Kong is the autonomous state of the People's Republic of China. In 1898, a 99-year lease agreement was signed between the British and Chinese Governments for Hong Kong. In this leased land, the British Government used to deploy its military contingent. In that period, the young chaps from Bharse also served there on behalf of the British Contingent. The families of these migrants used to go there and live for a certain period. At that time, the families gave birth to their children. Those children who were born in Hong Kong were given an ID (Identity) card. The Hong Kong ID holders got the opportunities to bring their dependents, such as spouses, children, and parents. This became an instrument of migrating to Hong Kong from Bharse.

5. London is the capital city of the United Kingdom. The British-India and Nepal Government signed the Sugauli Treaty in 1816 for a reciprocal exchange of support which permitted Nepali youths to serve in the British Contingent. As a result, those migrants who were born in Hong Kong and served in the British Army were allowed to go and live in London, as it is their best choices. Nowadays, a quite a lot these migrants have been living in London, including their dependents.

6. *Galla* is an agent formally appointed to select able-bodied youths in the British and Singapore Contingents.

village. During our conversation, I listened closely as he described how he built social networks to facilitate his smooth departure from Bharse and settlement in Butwal; *exposure to new experiences and social networks made me reconsider my ties to my community of origin, ultimately leading me to decide to migrate.* Nonetheless, Mr. Pahad's social networks with relatives and acquaintances in potential destination communities played a crucial role in his migration. Migration is often relational, with these networks serving as a key factor (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Thus, Mr. Pahad's story illustrates how social networks enabled him to expand his horizons beyond his community of origin.

After collecting the stories of two internal migrants in Butwal, I planned to engage with an international migrant in Hong Kong to explore his migration story in January 2016 and provide an update in 2023. With support from a migrant from Bharse living in Kathmandu, I connected with Mr. Balawan (male, 61), who had migrated from Bharse to Hong Kong as a young man to serve in the British Contingent. In gathering information from this research participant (hereafter referred to as 'the migrant'), I employed two different modes of communication. Initially, I used virtual methods, such as Viber and Messenger, to collect information. During the second encounter, I had the opportunity to meet him at a restaurant in Kathmandu while he was in Nepal. In our first virtual conversation, we conducted a formal introduction to familiarize ourselves with one another. During this introductory conversation, he shared; *I am a retired officer from the British Army. After my service, I found a job opportunity and moved to Hong Kong.* I noticed that Mr. Balawan was well-suited for a career that prompted his departure from the village, so I spoke with him to capture his migration experiences from Bharse. As he expressed; *Laure culture helped me to move*. Mr. Balawan's migration to Hong Kong began when he was a young, able-bodied man seeking to join the British Army. This suggests that favorable conditions can sometimes encourage migrants to leave their community of origin, aligning with de Haas's (2014) perspective. Therefore, not only do the challenges in the community of origin drive migrants to move, but the pursuit of better opportunities also serves as a significant motivator for migration, as demonstrated by Mr. Balawan's story. I also recorded the date and time of Mr. Balawan's visit to Kathmandu in February 2016 and provided an update in 2023. While he was in Kathmandu, I met him at a restaurant where we talked. As he said; *over time, my career growth enabled me to settle in Hong Kong, leaving Bharse.* Mr. Balawan's account suggests that he initially had no plans to leave his birthplace, Bharse. However, his professional and economic growth eventually enabled him to move away from the village where he was born and raised.

Given the circumstances, Mr. Himal faced a difficult life in Bharse, while Mr. Pahad gained exposure to new places and developed social networks, and Mr. Balawan leveraged his physical strength and abilities. The stories of Mr. Himal, Mr. Pahad, and Mr. Balawan reveal that they left their community of origin due to various push factors. They moved from their village for multiple reasons, not just a single cause. This highlights that migration is driven not only by the challenges of the community of origin but also by the pursuit of better opportunities.

Migrants' Experiences of Harnessing New Networks

For migrants, expanding networks with neighbors and other groups after settling in destination communities is a crucial aspect of the settlement process. During our ethnographic study in February 2026 and provided an update in 2023, I planned to meet and speak with one internal migrant and one international migrant from Bharse to understand how they built new social networks in their destination communities. Based on our criteria, I selected an internal migrant in Kathmandu and an international migrant in London. I first spoke with Ms. Akash (female, 64) and then Mr. Kriti (male, 64).

We began our conversation upon arriving at her home. Initially, it was informal, which helped us transition into the main agenda. I then prompted her to share her experiences of how she developed new social networks in Kathmandu, where she currently resides after leaving Bharse. As she shared; *fellow migrants and acquaintances helped me settle in Kathmandu, but later on, I developed relationships on my own.* For Ms. Akash, as a migrant and settler in a new home community, developing new networks was crucial for achieving her social, economic, professional, and residential goals. Whether she liked it or not, she had to stay connected with the local people. In this context, I reference Williams et al. (2020), who found that social capital, particularly networks, has become a valuable resource for migrants. It was essential for Ms. Akash to expand her relationships with new groups and institutions and to familiarize herself with new systems to improve her daily life. This view is further supported by Linhard and Parsons (2019), who argued that migrants in new communities create new meanings and expand their social spaces.

Through these new networks, Ms. Akash gained opportunities, including personal contacts, participation in social functions, and institutional involvement. This perspective aligns with King and Lulle (2016), who noted that migrants engage with new groups to adapt to new systems and expand their social spaces, thereby accessing better opportunities. Ultimately, Ms. Akash broadened her social networks in search of better opportunities within and beyond her new community. In our second meeting in February 2016 and provided an update in 2023, I met her at the same place to discuss the social connections she maintained after settling there. As he stated; *the social context of Kathmandu is different from Bharse. I do/did not see my next-door neighbors for many days or even*

months. After settling in Kathmandu, Ms. Akash compared the social context of her birthplace with that of her new city. She found the social environment in Kathmandu to be quite different from that of Bharse. This prompted her to create new social avenues and form relationships with various groups of people to adapt to the new context.

My ethnographic research journey progressed as I sought to capture the experiences of another international migrant, Mr. Kriti (male, 64), who now lives in London after leaving Bharse. In March 2016, and provided an update in 2023, with the help of a fellow migrant from Bharse, I connected with him virtually. After a brief introduction, I explained the purpose of our call and requested the necessary information, to which he agreed. The conversation then shifted to his experiences in building new networks within a foreign community. As he shared; *to sustain myself, I needed to work, which became possible through the new social networks I built with friends and neighbors*. This version indicates that before his departure, he had social networks with relatives, fellow migrants, and acquaintances in London who helped him settle there. Even after his arrival, they supported him in becoming familiar with the new environment.

I met Mr. Kriti while he visited Kathmandu in late March 2016. Our conversation focused on his social ties in the new environment of London. As he expressed; *I developed another layer of new networks with friends and various groups of people*. This excerpt suggests that new networks helped Mr. Kriti adjust to his new environment. Additionally, I referenced a study by Hlatshwayo and Wotela (2018) that emphasizes the importance of new social networks as a crucial survival strategy for migrants. Indeed, these new social networks have been essential for Mr. Kriti in every place he has lived.

The experiences of Ms. Akash and Mr. Kriti indicated that both developed new social networks in their respective communities, enhancing their lives wherever they settled. Migrants not only maintain social networks from their community of origin but also build new ones within and beyond the recipient communities.

Migrants' Experiences of Opportunities and Constraints

In new geographical, social, political, economic, and environmental contexts, migrants from Bharse face positive and negative experiences as they navigate new opportunities and challenges. I first present the opportunities, followed by the challenges encountered by migrants in recipient communities.

In recipient communities, some migrants expressed satisfaction with the availability and accessibility of resources (such as food and non-food items), transportation (such as buses, jeeps, tempos, rickshaws, motorbikes, etc.), and communication services (mobile phones, landlines, and internet services like Wi-Fi, Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, etc.) as a result of settling in cities. They largely benefited from the material culture of urban areas, both within and outside the country.

In March 2016 and provided an update in 2023, I had another conversation with Mr. Himal (male, 66) in Butwal to understand his perspectives on the opportunities he gained after settling there. During this field visit, I observed that after moving to Butwal, he purchased warm clothing for the winter and lighter, plain clothes for the summer to adapt to the seasonal changes. Winters are very cold, while summers can be quite hot. To stay cool in the summer, he bought fans, and a fridge to keep extra food cool during the warmer months. These items helped him adapt more easily. As he emphasized; *the availability of foodstuffs in the local market has made life convenient, as I can quickly obtain what I need*.

Hence, Mr. Himal is satisfied with the material amenities available in his new location, which he considers better options for his needs. In Butwal, he can find vehicles at any time to travel to his destinations. With communication facilities like mobile and internet services, he can easily stay in touch with relatives, friends, and acquaintances, making it convenient to get things done. *I can buy any household items from the market whenever I need them,* he said; Mr. Himal's story aligns with Caglar's (2015) assertion that migrants gain access to improved physical and economic opportunities. This indicates that migrants benefit materially from their engagement in recipient communities.

On the contrary, I also highlighted the constraints migrants faced from Bharse. This issue can be linked to the experiences of Mr. Himal, who encountered cultural, psychological, and professional challenges due to the contextual differences between his community of origin, Bharse, and the recipient community, Butwal. In Butwal, he found it difficult to prepare new recipes because he was unfamiliar with them. As he shared; *the previous skills and experience I had didn't work here*. Similarly, the way he expressed himself in Bharse did not work in Butwal. In the early days after settling in Butwal, his way of thinking proved ineffective because he was still accustomed to the practices he had followed in Bharse. Additionally, the mindset and behavioral patterns of the local people differed from his, making it challenging for him to reconcile these differences. As he further added; *even today, my way of expressing myself is not like that of the local people. I couldn't erase the old memories from my mind, which made both me and others feel awkward*.

Another aspect of the conversation with Mr. Himal was the gap in his knowledge and skills in Butwal, stemming from the professional differences between Bharse and Butwal. In the early days, he struggled to acquire new professional knowledge and skills because he brought the old ones from his native community, which were not applicable in Butwal. He had to learn new skills to adapt. As he emphasized; *when I started working, my previous knowledge and skills were ineffective.* I

discussed the challenges he has been facing with ritual practices in Butwal. Despite his efforts, he couldn't perform the *Thaan*[7] to please the gods and goddesses in hopes of bringing fortune to the family. It was impossible to worship the deities in their original form with pure offerings, as he couldn't find the materials needed. As he further urged; *it was impossible to find pure milk, ghee, cow and buffalo dung, green leaves, local rice, and water for offerings.* Mr. Himal's experience can be understood through Giddens' (1986) structuration theory, which suggests that structures can present challenges at different times. One such challenge is social integration into a new system, as Mr. Himal engaged with and adapted to new social systems and customs in Butwal. Additionally, the challenges he faced in recipient communities differed from those in his community of origin. This suggests that migrants have faced opportunities and challenges in the recipient communities, as evidenced by the experiences of Mr. Himal.

Migrants' Forward-Looking Eyes

In recipient communities, all migrants from Bharse developed new strategies to navigate their circumstances better, as these environments require different approaches due to contextual differences. In this context, I present the story of a migrant, Mr. Pahad (male, 44), to understand how he developed future strategies for better adjustment. During a conversation, he shared strategies he had been contemplating for other days. He plans to continue working until his retirement, as it is a means of survival. This permanent job provides him income needed to support himself and his family. Given the stability of his current position, along with his age and the scarcity of other job opportunities in Butwal, he is unable to consider alternative employment in the area. As he expressed; *I remain committed to my current job, which serves as my personal and familial strategy*.

Change is inevitable for Mr. Pahad, and being proactive about his future is essential. Although this strategy is not formally documented, Mr. Pahad consciously developed short- and long-term strategies, which are reflected in his daily life. In this regard, I added another part of Mr. Pahad's story, which he enthusiastically shared as another strategy he had been considering. As he spoke; *a strategy is to make my children independent by providing them with a better education on other days.*

Mr. Pahad's educational strategy became a strong focus after settling in Butwal. This aligns with Giddens' (1986) structuration theory, which suggests that agents (migrants) act upon systems in response to changing situations. Developing new strategic ideas in recipient communities is a key concern for Mr. Pahad. Adapting to new conditions is a strategy he employs in the post-migration period. The community of origin, recipient communities, and Mr. Pahad's choices or interests are interconnected, as supported by Giddens' (1986) structuration theory. The new environment encourages Mr. Pahad to devise fresh ideas for a better future. Additionally, he shared his strategy for empowering his children on other days; *one of my future strategies is to maintain my health.*

In my research journey, I observed that, like Mr. Pahad, other migrants from Bharse -Mr. Himal, Mr. Khola, Ms. Akash, Mr. Balawan, and Mr. Kriti - did not cling to their old plans in their new communities. Along with other strategic considerations, Mr. Himal, Mr. Khola, Mr. Balawan, and Mr. Kriti also contemplated educational strategies for their children's better future, aligning with Mr. Pahad's approach. Additionally, they developed new strategies to improve their chances of survival. They explored various approaches to seek better options in their new environments, based on their personal and familial needs, choices, professional engagements, and contexts.

Research Insights

Based on the insights from my doctoral research, migration occurred under both unfavorable and favorable conditions within the community of origin. While migrants from Bharse faced numerous challenges in their daily lives, they simultaneously sought better options in Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London. Additionally, the relatively better conditions in their community of origin also motivated them to pursue improved prospects in other places.

This research highlighted that the triggers of migration were both positive and negative conditions experienced by migrants. It challenged the traditional view, which predominantly focused on the negative aspects of the community of origin as push factors. One insight from my research was that as people become more affluent[8], they are more likely to move away from their current community. Under both uncomfortable and comfortable conditions, migrants seek better options in other places by gathering information from relatives, friends, and acquaintances while building social networks. Thus, factors such as challenges, opportunities, and social networks drive migrants.

After settling in Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London, migrants from Bharse adapted to new social, economic, professional, and residential positions that offered better options, which is an important insight. Furthermore, migrants from Bharse experienced both opportunities and challenges in the recipient communities, where they settled. Nonetheless, bliss and plight are binary opposites for migrants, wherever they go and live. In response, migrants devised new strategies that allowed them to continue exploring better options within

7 *Thaan* is a statue of stone erected to worship the deities in which animals are sacrificed to make them happy so that people could receive fortune in life.

8. Affluent refers to individuals who are economically well-off, educated, and hold leadership or earning positions.

and beyond their current communities. Nonetheless, this doctoral research primarily addresses how migrants pursued better options, regardless of their locations.

Conclusion

In my research of migrants from Bharse living in Butwal, Kathmandu, Hong Kong, and London, I concluded that they typically seek better opportunities within their current communities and beyond. This research challenges the traditional notion that migration is primarily driven by the challenges faced in the community of origin. Instead, it emphasizes how personal and familial growth can also motivate migrants to leave their communities, as they pursue better opportunities under both favorable and unfavorable conditions. By doing so, migrants aim to improve their social, economic, and professional circumstances while addressing challenges with new strategies. Seeking better options is a defining trait of migrants striving for prosperity, as observed in the conditions of migrants living across multiple. The structuration and social capital theories also highlighted that the existing social structures (hereby systems and features) typically influenced migrants to move on by leveraging networks. In this regard, this research goes beyond conventional theoretical and methodological approaches, which focus on geography and population counts within a positivist paradigm, and opens new avenues for studying migration through an interpretative paradigm.

Declarations

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to Prof. Bhim P. Subedi, PhD, Tribhuvan University; Prof. Prakash C. Bhattarai, PhD, Kathmandu University; and Prof. Krishna Bista, PhD, Morgan State University, USA for their immense support in helping me achieve my doctoral degree. In addition, I am indebted to Dr. Prakash Kumar Paudel, a TVET Researcher at Kathmandu University, School of Education, for his constructive and critical comments in this extended abstract. I should not hesitate to be thankful to Mr. Kanchan Mani Dixit for the rigorous language edit. Likewise, I cannot escape without giving appreciation to Mr. Sanjay Kumar Pun for the language check. I would also like to express my gratitude to Kathmandu University, School of Education for providing the option for my doctoral studies. Last, but not least, I am deeply grateful to my research participants and all those who supported me throughout my doctoral research journey.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

I obtained verbal consent from my research participants and ensured their anonymity. This study was conducted independently as part of my doctoral research.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable

Availability of Data and Materials

Data can be shared with others if required.

Competing Interests

There are no competing interests in this study.

Funding

No funding.

Authors' Contributions

All work was carried out by the author himself.

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