

Structuring Labour Migration in Rural Nepal: A Case of Babiyabirta VDC, Morang, Nepal

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Abstract

Labour migration has been a patterned behaviour in Nepal. It has tremendous implication on country's social and economic development. In this regard, this paper tries to identify structure of labour migration from rural Nepal based on data obtained from a micro-level sample survey conducted in 2009. The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative information. Findings suggest that migration is a result of an interactive function of multilevel social structures –individual, household and community structures or a larger society. The social structure plays a role of social networks by sharing experiences and information and facilitating potential migrants in the society. Household accumulates knowledge about migration through the interaction with community people and larger society and interact with family members. Finally, household takes decision whether and who (household member) to involve in migration.

Out-migration is pervasive among individuals that are able bodied, literate, and even educated males and they mostly belong to hill origin. Most of them are from household with land but size of land is small so about 77 percent families are facing the problem of food insufficiency. Regarding community and larger social structure, there are about a dozen of formal social and development organizations currently active in Babiyabirta. Access to these organizations is relatively better among migrant's households. Friends, relatives, neighbours, recruitment agencies, and agents are the main actors among the social networks. It is instrumental to connect villagers with foreign labour migration by channelling the migration process at three levels – origin, other intermediate cities, Kathmandu, and destination. They provide knowledge about migration, financial support, and help in the process.

Introduction

Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), a government body through the recent Population and Housing Census 2011 recorded absentee population of 1.92 million, about 7.3

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percent of total population (CBS, 2012). The same source through Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS 2010/11) shows 20.3 percent absentee population (CBS, 2011). It is to note here that the same source in about less than two years period publishes two contrasting figure of absentee population. If we adjust the NLSS proportion to the total census population the absentee population would be more than 5 millions. These absentees are out-migrants and emigrants and most of them are labour migrants. Quoting government source, Bruslé (2010) estimated that there are about 2.6 Nepalese currently working in the foreign countries. This figure represents labour migration. However, it does not include illegal labour migrants and other absentees such as dependents, students, etc. With these bases, an academic guesstimate can be made that there may be more than 3 million Nepali labours working in foreign countries.

The data indicates that labour migration has been a patterned behaviour in Nepal. Such migration behaviour has begun in 1990s and has been increasing every year, month, and day. There is no indication that it will be stopped in near future. It is because every year 400,000 population enter into labour force, but there is no possibility of absorbing them in the country due to political instability and low economic development. Such a long lasting trend of labour migration may have a serious implication on country's social and economic development. Until and unless we have rigorous and scientific research, it is not possible to make any conclusion about what sorts of impacts of such migration behaviour would imply on social and economic development of the country. Besides, it is also important to understand current migration behaviour and its structures that have made current labour migration possible.

This paper tries to identify structure of labour migration from rural Nepal with special reference to Babiyabirta VDC, Morang. The paper is based on data obtained from a micro-level sample survey conducted in 2009 for author's doctoral study and for a commissioned research carried out by CMI-Norway and CEDA, TU. The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative survey covered a sample of 497. Qualitative survey was carried out using the respondents from those migrant households. Focus group discussion, in-depth informal interview, informal talk, and case histories were the main tools used for collecting qualitative information.

Framing Migration Structure

New economics of migration has some distinctive features to look at migration studies. According to this framework, household or family is a unit that makes decision for labour migration, not an individual (Stark, 1984). Theory of 'relative deprivation' is a key to migration decision that a household compares its current income and expected future income with reference households (Stark & Bloom, 1985). When a family or household finds deprived of income and wealth and finds future risk relative to other families, they adopt a strategy to improve the income and diversify the future risk. Harbison (1981, p. 226) in a similar vein points out that the family is the structural and functional context within which motivations and values are shaped, human capital is accrued, information is received and interpreted, and decision for migration is put into

operation. She further considers family as the link between the individual and the larger society. Preferences and needs of the individuals are shaped within the socio-economic and cultural context of the family and the opportunities are shaped within the larger societies. In this way, household or family is an ultimate decision maker for migration and it is placed in between individual and larger society or community.

An individual is a member of a family or household where s/he is located. Family is surrounded and governed by the social structure, larger society, which offers opportunities and constraints based on the prevailing routinized rules and resources. Therefore, the immediate structure of an individual is thus family and then kin groups or social networks where s/he is located. Individual is knowledgeable and an active agent. S/he achieves knowledge about the migration through interpersonal communication in the locality, kinship networks, or reference households that have previous experience of migration. S/he shares idea and knowledge about migration with family. The family or household interacts with its family members and with larger society. With the interactions between these three levels of structures, household evaluates the need and preferences in reference to other households and future risk of income (Stark, 1984; Stark & Bloom, 1985) and then collectively makes decision whether its member to involve in the migration.

Once a household decides to involve in migration, another important step is to make decision who or which member is to be involved in migration. It is because migration is selective (Lee, 1966; Bogue, 1969; Zelinsky, 1971) that not all the members in households are involved in migration. Some members in the household may have some preferential characteristics that make potential for migration. Selectivity of age and sex is widely accepted phenomenon in migration. It is even more important that labour migration needs particularly muscles. Along with the globalized competitive labour market, education and skill are also equally pertinent in the selectivity of migration. It solely depends on the labour market that what types of labour in terms of education and skill are in demand. Based on knowledge about work to be done at destination and potentiality of family members, therefore, a household decides who to involve in migration.

Above discussion shows that the migration decision is a result of an interactive function of multilevel social structures, that is, individual, household and community structures (Junming, 1997; Massey 1990; Bilborrow et al., 1987). This social structure works as social networks that share experience and provide information to help potential migrants whether and how to migrate and help to minimize cost and risk of migration. Accordingly, in order to understand complete process, rural out-migration is necessary to analyse at all three levels of social structure – individual, family or household, and community level, which this paper tries to attempt.

Out-migration in Babiyabirta

Babiyabirta is one of the highly migration prone VDCs in Morang. Both internal (out and in-migration) and international (emigration and immigration) migration are prevalent

in the VDC. Overall migration is 17.2 percent of total sample population in Babiyabirta and the work out-migration² is 14.5 percent (Table 1). Of total sample household, 41.3 percent have at least one migrant who resides outside home for work. Multiple migrants in a household seem to be quite common in the VDC. Migrants on the average are 2.54 persons and the work migrants are 1.9 persons per household. The prevalence of migration is even higher if we include the returnees. About 18 per cent of the total sample households have at least one returnee.

Internal migration is 46.2 percent who destined to different parts of the country. Migrants who destined to outside countries including India are 54 per cent. Migration to third countries is 26 percent in Babiyabirta. Migration trend for those destined to India has decreased and to third countries has increased. It indicates that priority for labour migration from rural Nepal has been shifting towards third countries. Mean duration of out-migration is 3 years. However, there are 22.3 percent who have left home for 5 years or more. Overwhelming majority of migrants are doing non-agriculture work (95%) and the works are mostly unskilled indicating migration from rural Nepal is a process of occupational shift from agriculture to non-agriculture.

Table 1 : Some Selected Out-migration Statistics in Babiyabirta

Variants of Out-migration	Percent	Number
Total migrants including dependents (%)	17.2	3,037
Current work out-migration (n=346)	14.5	2,383
Households having migrants (%)	41.3	497
Average number of migrants per HH (Average)	2.5	206
Returnees (%)	17.7	497

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Structure of Rural Out-migration

This study is limited to information collected from household survey with some qualitative interviews that may have limited usage for analysing social, household, and individual structures regarding migration. Social network is the only variable to discuss about social level structure, synonymously called community level structure. Characteristics of household head such as age, sex, education, and family size and household property such as land are the main structure at household or family level. Age, sex, marital status, and education are the individual level structure.

Individual Level Structure and Out-migration

This study is delimited to out-migration, member of sample households who have left home for work. Destinations are both within or outside country and the outside country

2 Work out-migration includes those who are aged 5 years and above left home for work.

includes mainly India, Middle-east, and Malaysia. Individual level variables represented by migrant's personal characteristics include age, sex, marital status, literacy, educational attainment, and ethnicity based on hill or Tarai origin.

Caste/ethnicity is both individual and family or household level variable. It exerts cultural identities and it has historical and cultural linkage with migration to India and other countries as well. So, use of caste/ethnicity may help to understand the migration behaviour in association with social networks that influence migration and the decision making process. Caste/ethnicity is classified broadly into two groups, hill and Tarai origin. Variation in proportions of migrants between groups in all categories of individual level structure is found to be significant. Migration of hill group is in majority (56.4%), only about 44 percent are from Tarai origin among migrants (Table 2).

Table 2 : Individual Characteristics of Out-migrants in Babiya Birta

Migrant's Characteristics	Percent	Number
Caste and Ethnicity		
Hill origin	56.4	195
Tarai origin	43.6	151
Age Group		
< 20 & > 40	26.3	91
20-40	73.7	255
Sex		
Female	16.2	56
Male	83.8	290
Marital Status		
Unmarried	40.5	140
Married	59.5	206
Literacy		
Illiterate	9.8	34
Literate	90.2	312
Total	100.0	346
Education attainment		
Some Primary	15.3	45
Some Secondary	39.8	117
SLC and above	44.9	132
Total	100.0	294

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Mean age of migrants is 29 and the median age is 27 years. The vital age bracket for migration is approximately from 20 to 40 years, where the concentration of migrants is high. Age is classified accordingly as age between 20-40 years and otherwise. Migration in this age group (73.7%) is almost 3 times higher than in age group less than 20 and above 40 years (26.3%). Males tend to migrate by more than 5 times females. Migration according to age and sex is the indication that people migrating outside home for work

need to involve in muscles work, which is difficult for those who are relatively younger, older and females. Variation in migration due to marital status is also found to be meaningful that percentage of married migrants is considerably higher (59.5%) than that of unmarried (40.5%).

Table 3 : Household Level Characteristics of Out-Migrants, Babiyabirta

Household Structures	Percent	Number
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hill origin	52.9	109
Tarai origin	47.1	97
<i>Sex of HH head</i>		
Male headed	72.8	150
Female headed	27.2	56
<i>Family size (mean=7.1)</i>		
1-5	35.9	74
6-9	48.5	100
10+	15.5	32
<i>Literacy of HH head</i>		
Illiterate	38.4	79
Literate only	22.3	46
Some primary	17.5	36
Secondary and above	21.8	45
<i>Landholding</i>		
Yes	68.0	140
No	32.0	66
<i>Quintile of land (in ha.)</i>		
First: No land	32.0	66
Second: (0.0063 - 0.0508)	21.4	44
Third: (0.0558 - 0.1016)	18.0	37
Fourth: (0.1067 - 0.3386)	14.1	29
Fifth: (0.4063 - 6.7764)	14.6	30
<i>Food sufficiency</i>		
Insufficient	76.7	158
Sufficient around the year	23.3	48
<i>Main source of livelihood</i>		
Wage labourer	40.8	84
Own source (agri. /business/etc.)	9.7	20
Other (rent/pension/remittance/etc.)	49.5	102
Total	100.0	206

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Literacy and educational attainment are important for individuals to be involved in migration. Overwhelming majority of the migrants are literate (90%). Higher proportion of migration corresponds to the higher level of education. From the information it is revealed that there is positive relationship between education and migration. Only 15 percent have migrated among those who have some primary education; it increased to 40 percent for some secondary education, and reached to 45 percent for those who passed SLC and above including who have passed Bachelor and Master level examination.

Household Level Structure and Out-migration

A number of household variables are considered here to represent household level structure. Ethnicity is also discussed at household level, considering that it is the variable that represents cultural as well as family identity. Majority of the migrant households belong to hill origin (53%) and Tarai origin are only 47 percent (Table 3). Male headed households are overwhelming (73%) against female headed (27%). It is quite consistent with overall scenario of sex of household head that 80 percent of the total sample households are male headed. Average family size is quite big (7.1 members). Distribution of migrant households is consistent with the average that proportion of households having 6-9 members is largest among the migrant households (48%). Still 36 percent of households have up to 5 members. About 62 percent of the households have literate heads. However, 22 percent of them are literate only that they have no formal grade of education. Among the migrant households, about 18 and 22 percent heads have completed primary and secondary level of education respectively.

Landholding is the most important indicator to represent economic as well as social status of the rural household. It indicates capability of a household to invest for migration. The average landholding size among migrant households is 0.2191 hectares. The land inequality is high that the Gini coefficient is 0.80. About 32 percent of the migrant households are landless. Even among those who have land are also scattered and only a few have land sufficient for their survival. Evidence of food sufficiency supports this finding that almost 77 percent of migrant households have food not sufficient for year around. And, only about 10 percent households survive with their own source of livelihood. Other 41 percent depends fully upon wage labourer and the remaining survives with various activities including remittance, pension, etc.

Community Level Structure and Out-migration

Social Institutions

Institutions are social structures located at the community and the broader society. It has important role to govern and operate human behaviour. The social institutions have close relationship with migration behaviour. It helps individuals by providing knowledge and information on risk and opportunities and also works as social capital. Some formal institutions in association with out-migration are discussed in this study. There are 12 social and development institutions currently working in the village. They are mainly

Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs). There are also a few ethnic based cultural organizations that are classified under ethnic organization and they belong to Indigenous groups from hill (Rai) and Tarai origin (Tharu, Khawas, Santhal, and Jhangad). Most of migrant households have access to information on the social and development institutions.

Table 4 : List of Social and Development Institutions

SN	Development Institutions	SN	Development Institutions
1	Sanchar Bikas Samuha	7	Mahila Bikas
2	Nepal Water Association (NEWA)	8	Foren Nepal
3	Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)	9	Lali Guras Club
4	Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)	10	Aama Milan Kendra
5	Nari Bikas	11	Sagarmatha Community Organization
6	Seto Guras	12	Ethnic Organization

These organizations also work for migration related issues. It is reported that some of these organizations are helping people in migration process (Table 5). The main sectors they are helping in migration related issues are providing information on migration (27%), raising awareness regarding safe migration (44%), counselling in migration process (10%) and providing credit/loan (67%). The first three supports are directly related to migration, but the last one, credit/loan, is not specific to the migration related process. As reported by the respondents, till the date of survey, these institutions do not have provision of providing loan or credit to the people for investing in migration process in study area. But they are positive towards such investment in the future, which has already been prevailing in neighbour villages such as Dangihat, Bahuni, etc. In these areas, however, some local cooperatives have been providing loan indirectly for migration purpose. People borrow loan from these institutions for different purpose such as vegetable farming, livestock, paddy, etc. and they use it to send their family member in abroad for work. However, they can receive loan for the purpose of migration from local money lenders and some financial cooperatives and bank. However, this type of loan is not accessible to poor for those who have no land as collateral.

Table : 5 Areas of Involvement of Social and Development Institutions on Migration

Help Provided by the Social and Development Institutions	Percent
Do the above institutions help in migration? (n=497)	9.7
If yes, how do they help? (n=48)	
Information on migration process	27.1
Awareness on safe migration	43.8
Help in migration process	10.4
Credit/loan	66.7

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Medium for Migration

It is important to understand who the appropriate medium for migration process is. Table 6 displays percentage distribution of both sample and migrant households for appropriate medium of migration. Relatives, friends, and neighbours of migrants or his/her family member are vital as social networks to connect people with migration. Majority of the sample households (59.2%) responded that relatives and friends are the appropriate contact persons for foreign labour migration. This percentage is 51.5 for migrant households. They are mostly returnees or connected with those who are working for migration process. The returnees have experience of previous migration by which they know about the process or have connection with agents, recruitment agencies or company at destination. They work at three levels in channelling the migration process - origin, other intermediate cities and Kathmandu and destination.

Table : 6 Medium for Foreign Labour Migration

Appropriate medium for migration	Percent of migrant households	Percent of total sample households
Friends/relatives of those who have migrated	51.5	59.2
Local agent working at village	1.9	3.0
Agent of other city	0.0	0.6
Agent from Kathmandu	0.5	0.4
Local recruitment agency	12.6	12.5
Recruitment agency in other city	3.9	2.6
Recruitment agency in Kathmandu	29.6	21.7
Total	100.0	100.0
N	206	497

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

At origin, relatives and friends who have relation with agents at villages and neighbour villages work as pool by sharing knowledge with potential migrants and connecting them to agents. As reported by the migrant households, relatives were the source of knowledge about migration for 62 percent and friends and neighbours were for the 55 percent of migrants (Table 7). Relatives/friends/neighbours also plays vital role in financial support either loan or *Sapat* (loan without interest) to meet the migration cost. In the study area, 16 percent of migrants managed their cost with the help of relatives living at both origin and destination. Friends/relatives/neighbours gave money to 44 percent of the migrants among those who took loan for migration abroad (Table 8). Role of relatives/friends may sometimes coincide with agents. When they work for some profit they are considered as agent not relatives/friends. Another level of role of relatives/friends is to connect migrants with agents and recruitment agency at nearby cities and capital city (Kathmandu) for the migration process. Respondents reported that relatives helped to 73 percent and neighbours/relatives helped to 56 percent of migrants in all the process of migration abroad (Table 8). Third level where relatives/friends work for migration process is destination. Survey found majority of the respondents reported that relatives (52%) and friends/neighbours (54%) working at current destination are the

main reasons for choosing current destination (Table 7). At destination, relatives/friends work in three ways.

- i) Some migrant workers have good relation with company where he or she works and they approach to the company to manage visa and send to their relatives/friends in Nepal. This tendency has been increased today and it is considered to be safer because sometimes people are cheated by agents and recruitment agencies.
- ii) Some migrant workers have relatives/friends at destination working in various companies. They can manage visa for the possible companies. Moreover, they may also have connection with recruitment agency at destination from which they manage visa and send to their relatives/friends in Nepal.
- iii) Some migrants have good relation with agents and recruitment agencies working in Nepal. In such case, they work as pool to connect their relatives/friends with agencies.

Table 7 : Sources of Knowledge and Reasons for Choosing Destination

Description of the responses (n=206)	Percent
<i>Source of knowledge for migration</i>	
Relatives	61.5
Neighbours/friends	54.6
Recruitment agency	12.7
News paper	6.3
Local agent/broker	4.9
Radio/TV	2.4
Other	11.2
<i>Reasons for choosing destination</i>	
Relatives there	51.7
Neighbours/friends there	53.7
Job is easy over there	43.4
Earning is better	44.9
Low migration cost	38.5
Climate is good	32.2
Good working environment	11.7
Others	1.9

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Recruitment Agencies

Besides relatives and friends, recruitment agencies have a contributing role in channelling migration process. The agencies provide information on migration to the migrants and help in accomplishing the process by preparing travel documents and contract letter. More than one-third of the respondents reported that the recruitment agencies are the right place to contact for migration. The percentage of those who know

about recruitment agencies is even higher among the migrant's households (47%). It may be due to that they may have already used to send their family member for foreign employment. Recruitment agency works for the whole legal process such as to manage travel document and contract document for employment at destination. It is reported that there are more than 600 labour recruitment agencies working for foreign labour migration in Nepal. In case of Babiyabirta, Biratnagar, Dharan, Itahari, Belbari, Urlabari, Damak, and Birtamod are the intermediate cities from where recruitment agencies and agents connected with these agencies. Most of these recruitment agencies working in these areas play as intermediary role to connect migrants with big recruitment agencies at Kathmandu where some of them send migrants also directly to the destination.

Table 8 : Supporter to Proceed, and Sources and Management of Cost for Migration

Description of the responses	Percent
<i>Persons who helped to proceed for migration (n=206)</i>	
Relatives	73.2
Neighbours/friends	56.6
Recruitment agency, Kathmandu	16.1
Local agent/broker	5.9
Local manpower agency	6.3
<i>Managing money for migration cost (n = 206)</i>	
Taking loan	39.0
Close relative (migrant) sent	2.4
Relatives (non-migrant)	13.7
Selling/mortgaging property	0.5
From saving	44.4
Total	100.0
<i>If it is loan, who provided loan? (n=80)</i>	
Relatives/Neighbours etc.	43.8
Local lender	37.5
Bank	10.0
Cooperatives	8.8
Total	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2009.

Agents

Agent of recruitment agencies is another type of migration network. Agent is equally important as the contact person for migration. Agents are also called 'middlemen' or 'broker' working in between migrant and recruitment agency for migration process. It is reported that there are more than 30,000 individual agents working in the country in connection with foreign labour migration. There are also local agents in each village in the rural areas. Agents are generally of two types: i) some agents work in connection with recruitment agency for some profit and ii) some do not have prior connection with recruitment agency and work as independent agent. They contact potential migrants, collect money, and then they bring them to the agency. People also contact agents by

themselves and ask for migration opportunity. This evidence may be due to upwardly biased responses of the respondents towards recruitment agencies. There are two main reasons for bias response. First, people usually do not trust independent agents because several fraud incidences have been evident with them. Consequently, a few independent agents work successfully and they even do not want to be introduced as agent. Second, agents are usually connected with one or more recruitment agencies and they introduce themselves as the staff of recruitment agency. People trust the agents when they work for recruitment agency.

Conclusion

The work out-migration in Babiyabirta is 14.5 percent and 41.3 percent of sample households have at least one migrant. It is observed that the priority destination of migration has been shifting from India to third countries and the rural out-migration has been a process of occupational shift from agriculture to non-agriculture.

Mean age of migrants is 29 years where about three fourth of migrants are aged 20 to 40 years and 84 percent of them are males. Though the majority of migrants are married, migration of unmarried persons is also common. More than 90 percent are literate and the higher proportion of migrants correspond to higher level of education, which indicates educated people also have attraction on foreign migration. In sum, out-migration is pervasive among able bodied, literate, and even educated males and they mostly belong to hill origin.

Majority of migrant households belong to hill origin. Male headed households are 73 percent and they are mostly with medium sized family (6-9 members). A considerable majority of household heads are literate (62%) and a significant proportion of them have some secondary education (22%) as well. Two-third of the migrant households own land but its size is very small that reflects around 77 percent families are facing the problem of food insufficiency around the year and only about 10 percent of them could rely on their own source of livelihood.

There are about a dozen of formal social and development organizations currently active in Babiyabirta providing knowledge and information on risk and opportunities for development. Access to these organizations is relatively better among migrant's households and some of them work for migration related issues as well. They help people in migration process by providing information on migration, safe migration, counselling and providing loan for migration.

Friends, relatives, neighbours, recruitment agencies, and agents are the main actors in social networks. Friends, relatives, and neighbours are instrumental that has been reportedly an appropriate bridge to connect villagers with foreign labour migration. Most are returnees who have previous migration experience and established connection with agents, recruitment agencies, and/or recruitment companies at destination. This network works channelling the migration process at three levels - origin, other intermediate cities (Biratnagar, Itahari, Dharan, Belbari, Uurlabari, Damak, Birtamod, etc.) and Kathmandu

and destination. They provide knowledge about migration and financial support (loan) as well as help in the process. Some of them work at destination to send visa to their relatives and friends. Some of them work as agents by charging fee for their help.

Recruitment agencies provide information and help in whole legal process. There are intermediate cities from where recruitment agencies and agents are connected. These agencies play as intermediary role to connect migrants with big recruitment agencies at Kathmandu. However, some of them send migrants directly to the destination as well. Agents are equally important as the contact person for migration. They work as bridging migrant with recruitment agency. There are many agents in the village. Some work for recruitment agencies and some work independently. Independent agents collect migrants and hand over to appropriate agencies.

As framed at outset, finding suggests that migration is a result of an interactive function of multilevel social structures, that is, individual, household and community structures or a larger society. The social structure plays a role of social networks by sharing experiences and information and facilitating potential migrants in the society. Household accumulates knowledge about migration through the interaction with community people and larger society and interact with family members. Household with those knowledge and interaction decides whether and who to involve in migration.

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