

# Rising Foreign Labour Migration and Implications for Farming and Food Security in Nepal

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**Abstract:** Escalating import of food and diminishing domestic production signal a profound challenge for Nepal on its path to achieving food security. This challenge not only relates to the question of land and farming but also mirrors recent socio-economic changes mainly triggered by foreign labour migration. In this article, I examine foreign labour migration in relation to its effects on an agrarian economy, exploring socio-economic contours of food security shaped by land and labour relations. In so doing, this paper draws on fresh insights gained from case studies carried out in two villages representing the Tarai and hill geography of Nepal. Findings show that while foreign labour migration has benefited both migrant and non-migrant households through inflow of remittances and creation of rural employment, commodification of land and subsequent dispossession have posed critical threats to food security of the poor as well as the nation. This article suggests that any discourses and policies that concern land, farming and food need to factor migration and associated socio-economic processes and patterns of changes.

**Key words:** Dispossession, farming, food security, labour migration, land

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign labour migration has seen a dramatic rise in Nepal in the last couple of decades, affecting the economy and society in profound ways. Labour migration has become a way of life for many, necessitated not just by economic hardships but also by 'cultural beliefs and social patterns', or the culture of migration (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011). With rising outmigration, discourses on migration and remittances in relation to economic growth and wider socio-cultural changes have grown within Nepal and outside. Numerous positive and negative impacts of labour migration are not just realised by migrant families but also by non-migrants, including people living in villages, local towns and across the whole country. In this article, I examine the effects of out-migration on land, farming and food security in broader terms.

In recent years, foreign labour migration has become quite unprecedented in terms of both scale and impact. Numerous studies have already examined different facets of foreign migration in relation to its contribution to remittances

(Kollmair *et al.* 2006; Seddon *et al.* 2002), gender and caste relations (Gartaula *et al.* 2010; Kaspar 2005; Sunam 2014), working conditions in destination countries (Bruslé 2012) and rural livelihoods (Poertner *et al.* 2011; Thieme 2008). Few studies have considered the questions of land, farming and food security (Adhikari and Hogley 2013; Maharjan *et al.* 2013).

Labour migration is largely held responsible for Nepal's achievement in poverty reduction from 42 per cent in 1996 to 25 per cent in 2011 (Lokshin *et al.* 2007; Adhikari and Hogley 2013). It is believed that labour migration saved the country from plunging into a serious economic crisis (Blaikie *et al.* 2002). Currently, Nepal has become the largest remittance receiving country in South Asia and the third largest in the world as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank 2014). Through labour migration, Nepal has been increasingly connected to distant nations, economies and cultures (Sharma 2013: 349). Furthermore, nearly 3 million Nepalese workers, one-third of the total working male

population, have left the country for foreign employment. Remittances they send back home have triggered numerous socio-economic changes. What do all these figures mean to the ways people do farming, access land, gain employment and attain food security? What impacts out-migration of fellow villagers have been on non-migrants, particularly on the poor and the landless? This article addresses these critical questions. Such questions are particularly important because about two-thirds of the population still depend on farming as their major occupation, although the share of farm income has declined. Estimated 20 per cent of the total households are landless (CSRC 2011), while increasing amount of land has been under-used. Import of food continues to rise at an unprecedented rate in once a food self-sufficient country (Adhikari and Hobley 2013; Bhatta 2011). In the light of these macro figures, it has become essential to see the impacts of migration on an agrarian and food economy in rural areas.

This article draws on two case studies from rural villages: one each from a Tarai district, Sunsari, and a hill district, Khotang. Although every hill and Tarai district is distinctive, representing two geographical areas would provide wider pictures of the changes that have occurred in the rural Nepal. This study can represent a 'microcosm' reflecting many factors, processes and mechanisms, which can also be identified in other parts of the country. While the Tarai case study was undertaken by the author, the hill case study draws on the work of Adhikari and Hobley (2013).

## NATIONAL CONTEXT: MIGRATION TRENDS AND REMITTANCES

Outmigration has a long history in Nepal. Many studies have described Nepalese going abroad and becoming *labures*<sup>1</sup> for Indian and British Armies

<sup>1</sup> Lahure is a popular term in Nepal which refers to migrants, particularly those who are admitted to British or Indian army.

(Thieme and Wyss 2005). Given the geographical and cultural proximity, India has long been one of the major destinations for Nepalese, particularly for the poor from the hills and Tarai region. Not only do Nepalese go to India as *labures*, but the vast majority of them work as labourers in different parts of the country such as New Delhi, Mumbai and Punjab, to name a few (Sharma 2008). More recently, Nepalese have found new destinations for labour migration in the Gulf States, Malaysia and South Korea. As the migration to these countries is qualitatively different from that to India in many ways, the becoming of 'new *labures*', in the terms of Seddon *et al.* (2001), has produced new discourses around impacts it has on the Nepalese economy and society.

The number of Nepalese workers going abroad has continuously been increasing. Today, over 1,700 Nepalese leave the country every day in search of work in foreign land (Sunam 2014). In a similar fashion, the inflow of remittances has also seen a rise, and estimated US\$5.2 billion was sent to Nepal in 2013 (World Bank 2014). Although working and living conditions abroad are substandard, often reported as inhuman and like living in jails (Bruslé 2012; The Guardian 2013), new *labures* are remitting money and goods back home. According to the recent National Living Standard Survey (NLSS), over 55 per cent of the total households in Nepal receive remittances (see CBS 2011).

In what ways remittances are mobilized is a vital question as it relates to the question of how labour migration has affected livelihoods of both migrant and non-migrant families. According to NLSS 2011, about 79 per cent of the total remittances are spent on food consumption (CBS 2011). Looking at the patterns of remittance use, migrant households must have seen an improvement in their food security or at least they have not been experiencing hunger. Other

indirect effects of migration and remittances could have influenced food security by altering land, labour and other socio-economic relations. At national level, discourses hover around remittances, with limited attention to the issues of labour shortage, farming, rural employment and food import. Some newspaper articles have highlighted these issues (THT 2013; TKP 2014), but systematic study is largely lacking. In the next section, I attend to these unexplored effects of migration, illustrating two village case studies.

## VILLAGE STUDIES: UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS AND PROCESSES OF MIGRATION IMPACTS

Here, I take two villages to examine the effects of foreign migration on land, farming and food security. As the focus of this paper is on the migration–farming–food security nexus, I do not explain here the minutiae of migration (who migrates, how, how much remittance sent back and so forth).

For collecting empirical data for this research, case studies were conducted in a village each in Tarai and hill districts, using household survey, focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews. This article does not intend to provide quantitative measures to observe changes, but rather aims to conceptually identify patterns and processes that have occurred in the villages.

### Tarai village: ‘Plotting’ and land dispossession

The case study in the Tarai region was conducted in Panchayan village<sup>2</sup> in Sunsari district of eastern Nepal. This village is located about 10 km from Itahari and 20 km from Dharan – both of which are recognized as large towns in Sunsari district. The village is nearby the East-West Highway and is connected to local towns such as Tarahara, Kanchhi Chowk and Jhumka, where local people

<sup>2</sup>The real name of the study village has been disguised to protect the identities of research participants.

go to work and trade goods. The study doesn’t cover the whole village, but focuses on a part of this village. About 360 households representing different caste groups, including Bahun, Chhetri, Rai, Tharu and Musahars, live in the study area. People in this village are involved in different occupations. In terms of the number of people employed, the main occupation is farming, followed by migration. Livestock-keeping and off-farm occupations—wage labour in the village and local towns—are also important sources of their livelihoods. The major crops grown are rice, maize, wheat, potato and mustard.

In the Panchayan village, migration has triggered varied social and economic effects. Let me start with some positive impacts on food security facilitated by migration and remittances. First, the number of mouths in the village has reduced as increasing number of people are dining abroad; over half of the total households have at least one family member engaged in foreign migration. This effect is not very much discussed in the everyday discourse, although it is very intuitive. These people also send remittances ranging from NRs<sup>3</sup> 5,000 to 50,000 per month back home, which their family members use to buy food and cover other household expenses. As a result, an active food market operates during haat bazaar, where a lot of people visit and buy foodstuffs. Even landless households, when involved in migration, have been able to afford ‘mitho khana’ (delicious food), which usually includes rice, meat and vegetables. This was not the case prior to pursuing the migration route. Consistent with national surveys, remittances are mainly spent on food in this village. However, migrant households were reluctant to invest in farming for, they said during FGDs, they didn’t find farming beneficial at all. The reasons that render agriculture unprofitable are, unfortunately, beyond farmers’ manoeuvre. The major reasons reported were lack of subsidies, no provision

<sup>3</sup>NRs=Nepalese Rupees. US\$ 1 = NRs 90 as of 10 August, 2012.

of minimum support prices, cheap Indian rice coming to the village and high wages.

Second, non-migrant households, including the landless, have been able to access land for sharecropping. Many farmers who were cultivating their own land and ex-sharecroppers are now migrants. Their family members find farming tedious and not a beneficial occupation as they are not much worried about food and other household expenses because they receive remittances. For this reason, landowning migrant households have given land to the landless for sharecropping. Some ex-sharecropper households have given up farming. As a result, it has become much easier in the village for getting land for sharecropping, from which many non-migrant poor and landless have benefited. They said 'khanako lagi chinta chhaina' (no worries about food). However, the trend and scale of land 'plotting', which I will describe later, has reduced the availability of land for farming.

For those who are dependent on labour, the wages in farming have sharply increased primarily because of the decline in labour availability in the village. Five years ago, daily wage for female was NRs 60 and that for male was NRs 100. Now, the wages have risen to NRs 200 for female and NRs 400 for male. The amount of work available in the village has also increased, not just wages. With the local economy receiving remittances, off-farm work opportunities are becoming increasingly available. Migrant households have often built new houses or repaired existing ones, which has provided many local people with daily casual work. Incomes from such employment have helped the poor to improve their food security. During the fieldwork in Panchayan village, I saw many people going to nearby towns for work on their bicycle; I would call them 'cycle commuters'. The off-farm workers say 'site jane' to refer to travelling to construction sites for work. That said, things have changed for the

poor and the landless, but it doesn't mean that their lives are now comfortable and secure. In the FGDs, workers unequivocally said that farm and even off-farm work were irregular, casual and not well-protected by laws and government actions. Workers did not know when and how they would be hired and fired.

However, such seemingly positive changes in the village became possible only at great economic and social costs. Arable lands have been taken away, reducing food production in the village. Large areas of arable land have been converted into housing plots through what is called 'plotting', targeting mainly the migrant households to purchase. In fact, many migrant households have purchased such small residential plots. This is similar to what can be called a 'real estate' business. A few rich villagers and other individual investors from nearby towns or cities, who buy village land located near roads, are the drivers behind the real estate business. They divide land into small parcels suitable for building houses, leading to the fragmentation of land. Then they sell the land for handsome profits. Migrant households' purpose of buying housing plots is not for building houses in most cases. Rather, it's their speculative investment in land ('matoma lagani'). They have seen others earning a lot of money by buying land and selling it later. Most people, if not all, in the village know that land price will continue to skyrocket. With increased number of buyers, land has become so expensive that genuine farmers cannot afford to buy land for farming – a real barrier to agricultural extension. The reason seems straightforward for rural people that farming is not profitable, rather speculative land purchase sounds a better deal for many. Keeping land idle and selling it after a few years may produce more profit than net income from farming. Thus, plotting has not just led to decline in arable land, but has also discouraged farmers from expanding their farming.

Land dispossession is another unexpected outcome of 'plotting'. When landowners do plotting or sell their land for plotting, the land set aside for this purpose is often left uncultivated or is not allowed to be cultivated. This means tenants can no longer work the land once it is set for plotting and, as a result, they become dispossessed of that land, taking away their means for self-provisioning of food. At least 15 households have been dispossessed of their land in the village. Actually, the process of dispossession hits the poor and the landless the hardest. Some households in the village have also been dispossessed of their land when they failed in migration processes – either not being able to earn remittances to pay back loan or being unable to leave the country for work due to health reasons or being cheated by migration agents, called 'manpower agencies'. They become indebted and eventually sell land to repay the loan.

Migration goes further to speed up the process of rural-urban migration, affecting agricultural production in the village. Among migrant households, those who receive huge amounts of remittances, have moved to large nearby towns where they have bought new houses or built own houses there. These households are usually large landowners in the village. Households with less remittances earned and small land have migrated to small local towns. Such movement of households doesn't stop here. Even left-behind family members of migrants have moved to towns where they live in rented rooms for educating their children in private schools where quality of education is perceived to be better than in government schools. In this way, the rural area has seen expansion of old towns and creation of new ones. In all forms of movement, the settlers in local towns often quit farming, relying on remittances sent by their family members. Some completely sell their village land, while most of these rural-urban migrants

lease out land to tenants; some of them leave land even uncultivated. In addition, their movement to local towns further aggravates labour shortage in the village.

Here, I presented the impacts of labour migration on the ways people do farming, access land and employment in the Tarai. Similar stories from the hills have been illustrated in the ensuing section.

### **Hill village: 'Everyone is leaving' and idle land**

This case study focuses on two villages in Khotang, a hill district in eastern Nepal. This is a remote district, lacking even road connection to the district headquarters until recently. Until foreign migration became accessible to the people of Khotang, their major occupations were farming and livestock keeping. In this district, there are still a few economic and employment opportunities outside agriculture.

Of the total 320 households surveyed in the study villages, about 60 per cent had someone or the other working abroad. This indicates how important and attractive choice outmigration has become for the people living in the hinterland. Here, too, I begin with the positive impact of migration on the livelihoods of the local people, in particular on food security.

In the study villages, remittances have enabled migrant households to purchase food when needed. The amount of remittances each migrant household receives ranges from NRs 6,000 to NRs 100,000 every month. Even non-migrant landless and poor households have got opportunities to cultivate others' land under sharecropping arrangement. The terms and conditions of sharecropping now favour tenants. Tenants have become choosy now than before as they do not take in pakho bari or marginal land for sharecropping, rather they just go for fertile land or khet where they can produce

paddy. Using remittances, former landless or near-landless households, mainly Dalits<sup>4</sup>, one-third of them, have bought arable land. This 'unusual' change became possible due to Dalits' involvement in international migration. With a lot of male members of family going abroad, shortage of male labour has been realised. This has inflated wages, benefiting the labour class. Daily wages in farming were NRs 30 for male and NRs 20 for female a decade ago, which have now risen to about NRs 400 for male and NRs 200 for female. Since migrant households have either built new houses or refurbished their old ones, and many workers have found non-farm employment in their own village. Income from such employment has certainly improved their food purchasing capacity.

Nevertheless, numerous negative effects of migration on farming have also been identified. Migration has led to a decline in food production in the village in many ways. Arable lands are increasingly being left idle or uncultivated as tenants are not interested in marginal and poor quality land. Furthermore, tenants and landowners do not look after land well – no treatment of landslides and even no maintenance of terraces and bunds. These land improvement activities are important for enhancing the fertility of land. In addition, foreign migration has pushed migration of local people from village to nearby towns and from hills to the Tarai. Migrant households who have accumulated more than NRs 5 lakhs have shifted to the Tarai, whereas low earners have moved to local towns. This phenomenon has created labour shortage as well as constrained farming. Such local migrants have left their village land uncultivated or planted trees there.

Despite increased availability of land for sharecropping, non-migrant households have not

found farming attractive for some reasons, which have inflated farming costs. First, wages have increased sharply in the last decade mainly in response to labour shortage, as noted earlier. Due to high labour costs, farmers consider farming as not a beneficial occupation in the village. While many believe that increased wages have benefited the labour class, the actual case is far from such a claim for important reasons. Farmers have switched to different strategies to avoid high labour costs. First, they have revived *parma*, a reciprocal labour exchange system. Second, they have started planting trees, perennial crops, on their land than cultivating cereal crops having shorter rotation. Third, some farmers have left land idle instead of cultivating crops. Another strategy to cut down on labour costs is renting land to the landless or land-poor for sharecropping.

The second reason for increased costs of farming is that prices of chemical fertilizers have increased, as elsewhere around the world, deterring farmers from using them. Again, largely due to labour shortage, migrant households have reduced the number of livestock, which means less supply of organic fertilizers in the farm. Third, even if farmers produce surplus, there is limited access to market and prices of hill cereal crops have declined. Maize price plummeted from NRs 34/kg to NRs 17/kg in two years. Rice from the Tarai or India is cheaper and tastier than the rice grown in the hills. In the past, people did not eat much rice and they were happy with maize and millet because rice was expensive in the hills due to high transportation costs. But now, with improved access to road transport, access to rice has increased. Since surplus is not worth producing, farmers have reduced cropping intensity. They used to cultivate maize twice a year. Now, they just do a single maize crop a year. Overall, farmers—both owner cultivators and sharecroppers—have worked land just for the purpose of self-food sufficiency and not surplus production.

<sup>4</sup> Dalit is a collective noun for people who were called 'untouchables' and have long been marginalised and excluded on the basis of caste hierarchy nurtured in Hindu religion. The population of Dalit in Nepal is about 3.7 million (approx. 14% of the total).

## CONNECTING SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF THE TARAI AND HILLS: BROADER PICTURE OF MIGRATION IMPACTS

This paper has examined how migration affects access to land, farming and rural employment, which has profound implications for food security. As the case studies illustrated in the previous section show, foreign labour migration has triggered some positive outcomes not just for the households involved in migration but also for non-migrants, including the landless and the poor. Since migration effects are contextual and relational, food security of already marginalized and poor households has further deteriorated in many instances, if not most, through the processes of land dispossession and commodification of land.

As the case studies draw on a Tarai and a hill village of Nepal, some effects of migration are similar in both places, while others are different due to their geographical and socio-economic specificities (see Table 1). Also, some positively presented effects may not be so for some households since rural households are differentiated along economic class, caste and gender lines. For instance, increased wages may be a positive change for wage workers. At the same time, it may impact farmers, those who hire labour, negatively.

Migrant households receiving remittances have been able to feed their members. When they run out of food, they use remittances to purchase food items in nearby groceries. While foreign migration is class biased, few poor households have been able to engage in foreign migration. Some landless households, mainly Dalits, have become landowners reconstructing their social identities because these social groups represent highly marginalized and socially excluded groups. Unfortunately, not all households have become successful and there are households who have failed to pursue migration or generate remittances. Such households have become indebted and

landless, constraining their capabilities to regain access to land and food.

Table 1 : Effects of labour migration on agriculture and food security

Effects	Tarai	Hill
<b>Positive</b>		
Increased household income through remittances	√	√
Land purchase	√	√
Increased wages	√	√
Increased access to land (through sharecropping and purchase)	√	√
Increased off-farm work/employment in and outside agriculture	√	√
<b>Negative</b>		
Decline in arable land (increase in fallow land)	√	√
Land dispossession	√	
Land fragmentation	√	√
Indebtedness	√	√
Labour shortage	√	√
Reduced livestock numbers	√	√
Decreased crop intensity	√	√
Increased rural-urban migration	√	√
Decline in food production	√	√
Rise in food import	√	√

Following the rising trend of migration, local food production has declined in both hill and Tarai villages as there are plausible qualitative reasons to support this claim. Successful migrant households have left farming, moved to towns, or given their land for sharecropping. In some cases, land has been left uncultivated. Even households involved in farming are not doing it in a way they used to do – cultivating single crop a year, just paddy or so opposed to producing at least two crops a year – and thus arable land has been under-used. Surveying migrant households,

Maharjan *et al.* (2013) also find negative impact of migration on the production of cereals in the western hills of Nepal. While household demand for food has been met through remittance incomes, the question emerges what happens when the demand for labour migration becomes thin, as it has happened during the global financial crisis of 2007/08.

There are other critical factors triggered by migration leading to decreased food production. As evident in both case study sites, shortage of male labourers has been experienced following the migration of local people, and rural to urban migration, mainly facilitated by remittances. Due largely to labour shortage, wages have increased leading to high farming costs against low cereal prices. The labour shortage has compelled households to reduce the number of livestock and thus less organic fertilizer supply and more so in the supply of meat and dairy products. Particularly in the Tarai, 'plotting' has consumed arable land and has also exacerbated land fragmentation and the subsequent dispossession of tenants or farmers has constrained farming. Gartaula *et al.* (2012) also warn of the negative implications of the reduction of arable land in the Tarai on the total food production in the country. Similarly, in the hills, fallow land has increased; landowning farmers and tenants have left some of their land, mainly marginal and pakho land, uncultivated or they have planted trees instead of cereal crops.

Some key questions that have emerged from this discussion are why farm households are not doing 'serious' agriculture or why remittances that they receive are not invested in farming. Migration has created labour shortage, inflating wages, which, coupled with the global rise in the prices of chemical fertilizers, has rendered farming occupation less beneficial. Even if farmers produce surplus, farm-gate prices of cereal crops are not lucrative. Their produce have to compete

with cheap food from India where agriculture is heavily subsidized (Pritchard 2013) as compared to Nepal. There are no encouraging policies such as minimum support prices and other kinds of subsidy that could provide farmers with strong incentives to produce more. The argument here is that the problem of poor farming is not just due to migration and remittances. Rather, there are structural and policy issues that go beyond the control radar of individual farmers.

So far, I have discussed that remittances have fed migrant households, although local food production has plummeted and the amount of arable land has seen a decline. The question on 'what have been the effects on non-migrant households, who have not yet migrated or who are too poor to afford the costs of migration' is yet to be discussed. The landless and the poor have got an opportunity for sharecropping as many ex-sharecroppers or landowners have gone abroad for foreign employment; their harvest share has improved food security. In the hills, the terms of tenancy or sharecropping have become more favourable for tenants. This is not so in the Tarai, perhaps, due to the fact that there are many landless, chronic poor people who are in dire need of land for sharecropping. However, only households which have their own adequate supply of family labour are involved in sharecropping because of increased wages, which is, in fact, an outcome of migration itself. Otherwise, sharecropping is not worth practising for poor households, as already illustrated. In addition, a few labour households have increased their incomes from increased wages. Although farming work is abundant, farm owners or sharecroppers do not hire wage labourers to reduce costs. Rather, they have revived parma, left land idle or planted trees. So, increased wages have rather made the chance of getting work lower for rural workers, making them further vulnerable.



Nevertheless, what is noticeable in the village is that off-farm work (mainly led to flourish by remittances) – in construction sites in local towns or house repairs or new buildings in the village – have provided employment for the poor and the landless. Yet, such work is not regular or adequate to generate incomes sufficient for feeding family members year-round. Another negative effect on non-migrant farmers is that they cannot expand their farmland because land has become so expensive following the inflow of remittances that they cannot buy it from their village incomes; agricultural extension has become a distant dream for them.

## CONCLUSION

Rural households have experienced increased incomes through remittances following a labour migration route. Some of them have purchased land. Even a few non-migrant households have gained sharecropping opportunities in more favourable terms, while others have increased incomes through employment in farming or outside agriculture. However, there have been some adverse processes, already in place or foreseen in the near future, which have compromised the future food security in terms of local production at both household and village level and in terms of access to land. While every part of the country varies in its socio-economic and geographical terms, the parallels of such processes have occurred across many parts of the country since labour migration is not the unique case of a few villages in the Tarai and hills; rather, it is a widespread phenomenon. At village level, a decline in food production has increased net food buyer households. At national level, food import has surpassed food export. Foreign migration is highly likely to take the form of intergenerational pathway to overcome economic stresses as such tendency has been observed in many countries having a long history of international migration (Martin *et al.* 2006). Such outcomes would present broader political and social implications in the

future, which can hardly be positive if issues around food, land and farming are not addressed in a democratic and equitable manner.

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