Eternal Struggle for Legitimacy: A Case Study of Nepali Migrant Workers

Anish Lohani[1]

Abstract

This study examines the socioeconomic dynamics of returning Nepali migrant workers, focusing on their limited ability to achieve upward social mobility despite increased economic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) framework of capital and distinction, the research highlights how the acquisition of financial resources enables returning workers to enhance their lifestyle and consumption patterns but fails to bridge the gap in cultural and social capital required for social class elevation. The symbolic boundaries formed between returnees and traditional working-class individuals create a new "neo-lower class" that further entrenches social stratification and perpetuates inequality. Additionally, the study explores how migrant workers' economic practices, such as gentrification and their influence on youth to pursue foreign employment, eternalize cycles of social class reproduction and migration. Despite breaking cycles of poverty within their families and contributing significantly to Nepal's economy, these returnees remain excluded from elite social circles due to their lack of embodied cultural and social capital. The findings suggest that upward social mobility requires a holistic acquisition of economic, cultural, and social capital, underscoring the structural barriers faced by migrant workers in their pursuit of legitimacy and recognition in Nepalese society.

Keywords: symbolic boundaries, social class, economic capital, social capital, cultural capital

Introduction

From the world's tallest building to breathtaking man-made islands, Nepali migrant workers have labored tirelessly to transform the arid deserts of the Middle East into beautiful cosmopolitan cities. Due to the scarcity of jobs in Nepal, many individuals are forced to work abroad to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and return home with a greater economic capital. Yet, upon returning, stark reality strikes them when they realize that although they earned some economic capital that allowed them to have higher purchasing power, they remain tethered to their original social class. Despite their economic capital, which helped them to build modern homes and afford

1 Mr. Lohani is associated with Carmegie-Mellon Universirty, Qatar.

private schools for their children, most of them are unable to climb the social ladder due to their limited cultural and social capital. This phenomenon of migrant workers acquiring a modicum of financial stability yet being unable to gain higher social recognition creates a symbolic boundary between them and the traditional elites in Nepal, leading to social stratification. This paper uses Bourdieu's (1984) framework of taste, distinction, and capital in deciphering the lifestyle of returning Nepali migrant workers and how it compares with other working class and pre-existing elites of Nepal. This paper supports this argument by claiming that economic capital alone cannot secure upward mobility and acquisition of financial resources only creates an appearance of success. But without the embodied forms of capitals like cultural capital and social capital, those returnees are unable to achieve social class mobility. This distinction not only continues class divisions, but it also intensifies the boundaries for social mobility, suggesting that climbing the social ladder is far more complex than acquiring economic capital. As a result, the returnees are classified as "neo-lower class" which in turn detrudes other traditional working class, who never left Nepal, into even lower class. This makes it nearly impossible for those traditional working-class individuals to climb the social ladder and as a result they are forced to go for foreign employment to at least get recognized in the neo-lower class.

Nepali migrant workers, due to the possession of some economic capital, tend to create a symbolic boundary between them and other traditional working classes, and it leads to social stratification in Nepal. Economic capital refers to the possession of any tangible assets and wealth. Bourdieu (1984) highlights that individuals with greater economic capital draw a significant boundary between them and individuals without such capital. This is because there is a significant difference in taste and lifestyle between those two classes: The Higher class with highbrow tastes (like listening to classical music and eating in fancy restaurants) and the Lower class with lowbrow tastes (like eating in low end restaurants and exhibiting no such artistic tastes for highbrow music). In the case of returnees associated with foreign employment, they acquire greater economic capital than other traditional working-class individuals of Nepal. Consequently, they can leverage this economic capital to improve the lifestyle of their families, and their families can access better health facilities, food, and education. According to Sharma & Adhikari (2022), the data states that "96.8% of migrant worker returnees are non-vegetarian" (p.10). This suggests improvement in taste and lifestyle as meat is relatively more expensive than vegetables in Nepal and eating meat on a regular basis serves as a marker of legitimate and highbrow culture. In contrast, other traditional working classes in Nepal fail to spend extravagantly due to their lower economic capital which marks them lower in the society. This distinction draws the significant symbolic boundaries between returnees having the economic capital and traditional working class lacking the economic capital. Besides creating symbolic boundaries, returnees also gentrify the area, leading to social stratification. As Le Grand (2019)

posited, hipsters gentrify the surrounding which often forcibly displaces the working class. This can also be seen in the case of Nepali migrant workers, who use their economic capital to improve their neighborhood and raise the property price which forcibly displaces original low-income inhabitants to other poor neighbourhoods. According to Tharu (2023), "the impact of immigration in host areas is realized in the way it affects economic restructuring and social relations in local communities" (16). This suggests that the influx of migrant workers returning to the neighborhood transforms society, and this gentrification leads to social stratification.

In addition to gentrification, the Nepali migrant workers also influence students to go for foreign employment, reducing their cultural capital and perpetuating the social class inequality. The returnees set themselves as role models and they greatly influence individuals, who are mostly youths and students lacking the economic capital, to go on the path of foreign employment, instead of continuing their studies. This often reduces student's institutionalized cultural capital as they drop out of the university and continue to perpetuate inequality in the society. A Nepali worker working in Carrefour Mall of Qatar told me that "I was studying Biology in TU (Tribhuvan University). I found no future in it and the cost of university was already high for me to manage. Even if I had continued my studies, I would have to complete a master's in order to get a job, and completing a master's from Nepal or any other foreign country like the US was economically too burdensome for me, so I dropped from TU to seek my fortune abroad. I was influenced by a dai [acquaintance] in my village and now I am in Qatar earning decent money." This suggests that returnees, in addition to creating gentrification, also act as a role model for other traditional working classes and influence students to quit their education and seek jobs, decreasing their cultural capital. As a result, this entraps those students into the vicious cycle of social class reproduction as they lack cultural capital to climb the social ladder, and the result is more inequality. Although Nepali migrant workers returning from foreign employment have economic capital, which helps them in asserting their superiority to other traditional working classes of Nepal, most of them cannot assert the same superiority to other pre-existing elite or middle class due to their low cultural and social capital.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that elites usually have greater cultural capital (capital relating to education, degree and environment) and social connections that allows them to stand out compared to people of other classes lacking those forms of capital. Khan (2011), a sociologist who studied about an elite school, argues that individuals lacking corporeal knowledge (elite culture's knowledge embodied implicitly) and possessing solely cognitive knowledge (elite culture's knowledge gained explicitly) are unable to find ease- elite comfort in the social situation. He posits that elites usually have a higher cultural capital and corporeal knowledge which enables them to find ease in different social circumstances, while non-elites, due to their lower cultural capital, fail to find ease. Migrant workers, like non-elites, lack such cultural capital as on average

they have just 8.7 years of education (Gardner et al, 2011, 5). This shows that migrant workers lack corporeal knowledge and instead have to acquire those forms of capital explicitly, thus making them unable to fit in with ease as elites. Besides corporeal knowledge, returnees are also unaware of the rules of the game (the implicit rules one needs to abide for becoming an elite). Jarness (2018), a Norwegian sociologist who studied elite students in Oslo, argues that to experience ease one needs to know the rules of the game. Migrant workers, living abroad, get detached from the Nepali culture and lack knowledge of highbrow consumption of Nepal. They do not know the rules of the game to establish themselves as elites due to their limited cultural and social capital. The pre-existing elites look down upon the returning migrant workers and call them as khadi workers (working in Gulf), symbolizing the migrant workers as unworthy rich who failed to work in Nepal and took a shortcut to replicate the middle-class lifestyles at the cost of authentic cultural capital. This is evident because most migrant workers returning to Nepal live ostentatiously for they believe that being ostentatious is a sign of elitism. But little do they know that such ostentation is looked down upon in the elite class, like in New York, as discussed by Sherman (2018). Thus, the elites show a condescending attitude towards them as those who are undisciplined and unworthy of the elite class. As a result, they are placed intermediate between the middle class and lower class and termed as "neo-lower class" (Aftermath of COVID-19: Rise of a New Social Class in Nepal, 2020). Even though migrant workers are able to rise up against other traditional working class, they fail to achieve the elite class status due to their limited cultural capital. The best they can do is to provide their children with economic and cultural capital hoping that they can achieve upward social mobility.

Although returning migrant workers usually break the cycle of poverty and try to break social class reproduction of inequality by sending their children to private schools, many of them fail to achieve upward social class mobility. Bourdieu (1984) posits that climbing the social class ladder is extremely difficult as it requires legitimate economic, cultural, and social capital. Lareau (2014), a sociologist who studied the cultural capital of the middle class and working class, complements this idea by highlighting the importance of cultural capital. She argues that middle class families possessed a better understanding of the "rules of the game" (the implicit rules of highbrow culture) regarding how institutions work that helps them achieve upward mobility. In contrast, the working class lack cultural knowledge, making upward mobility challenging for them. This gap in cultural capital highlights the fact that greater economic capital but lower cultural capital deters the individual's ability to achieve social class mobility. According to Kumar & Tanaka. (2016), "Remittances have a positive effect on all the education variables of children left behind: a one percent increase in total remittances increases the probability of school enrollment by 3.4 percent points and the education expenditure by 0.25 percent" (2). Migrant returnees accept the fact that they may not be able to achieve social class mobility, but they want to ensure that their children get the

cultural capital to access social mobility. “I have encountered Roshan in the Gulf who came to the Middle East not as a rational and individual economic agent, but rather as the emissary of a household livelihood strategy (Gardner 2011, 47) This suggests that migrant workers do not care so much about their status but rather they are focused on improving the lifestyle of their family and helping their children climb the social ladder. So, no matter how harsh the condition is in Qatar or other gulf countries, they return back to work for the betterment of their family. Besides benefitting their family, the remittance sent by the migrant workers also helps in increasing dollar reserves of Nepal. From this remittance, elites are able to import luxurious products, send their children to universiies abroad and get health care in foreign countries. However, the elites do not acknowledge this privilege to the migrant workers who makes them possible for them. Since the government of Nepal is mostly controlled by elites of Nepal (Shrestha, 2024), the policies are made in such a way that elites can enjoy buying luxurious products using the forex money sent through remittance, while the migrant workers are forced to go back to foreign countries and work, and even their children are forced to do the same. This problem of continuous cycle of migration is highlighted by Limbu (2022), a researcher who interviewed Jeet and other Nepali migrant workers in Qatar. She notes that “Jeet’s narrative also suggests desires and intentions that give continuity to intergenerational cycles of migration” (p. 369). This problem still persists because it is easier for the government to increase forex reserves by sending them to the Middle East for work instead of providing them with resources inside the country. This perpetuates an eternal cycle of social class inequality where elites continue to be elites, and the working class continues to be lower class.

To recapitulate, although migrant workers can prove themselves superior compared to other traditional working classes of Nepal, they are unable to climb the social ladder. Instead, they are forced to stay in the non-elite class which further detrudes the previous lower class (traditional workers) to go even lower level. They are compelled to go to foreign employment in order to climb the social class ladder but even after working tirelessly they most often succumb to the neo-lower class, perpetuating a never-ending cycle of inequality.

References

Aftermath of COVID-19: Rise of a new social class in Nepal. (2020). South Asia Monitor. https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/aftermath-covid-19-rise-new-social-class-nepal

Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste 1984. https://monoskop.org/images/e/e0/Pierre_Bourdieu_Distinction_A_Social_Critique_of_the_Judgement_of_Taste_1984.pdf

Gardner, A. M. (2011, January 1). Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States. Retrieved October 28, 2024, from Research Gate website: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288942349_Why_Do_They_Keep_Coming_Labor_Migrants_in_the_Gulf_States

Gardner, A., Pessoa, S., Diop, A., Al-Ghanim, K., Le Trung, K., & Harkness, L. (2013). A Portrait of Low-Income Migrants in Contemporary Qatar. Journal of Arabian Studies, 3(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2013.806076

Jarness V, Pedersen W, Flemmen MP. The discreet charm of the children of the bourgeoisie: economic capital and its symbolic expressions at an elite business school. Br J Sociol. 2019 Sep;70(4):1402-1423. doi: 10.1111/1468-4446.12625. Epub 2018 Nov 28. PMID: 31475729.

Khan, S. R. (2013). The ease of mobility. In Elite Mobilities (pp. 136-148). Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203078532

le Grand, E. (2020). Representing the middle-class 'hipster': Emerging modes of distinction, generational oppositions, and gentrification. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23(2), 184-200. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418772168

Kumar, N., & Tanaka, R. (2016). Parental Absence, Remittances, and Educational investment of Children Left Behind: Evidence from Nepal. Retrieved from https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/151611122.pdf

Limbu, A. (2022). "A life path different from one of labour in the Gulf": Ongoing

mobility among Nepali labour migrants in Qatar and their families. Global Networks. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12396

Rachel Sherman (2018). 'A very expensive ordinary life': consumption, symbolic boundaries and moral legitimacy among New York elites, Socio-Economic Review, 16 (2) April 2018, Pages 411–433, https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy011

Sharma, A., & Adhikari, R. (2022). Lifestyle Pattern among Nepalese Migrant Workers in Gulf Countries and Malaysia. International Journal of Nursing Education, 14(2). https://doi.org/10.37506/ijone.v14i2.17978

Shrestha, P. M. (2024). Brahmins and Chhetris continue to dominate entry into civil service. Retrieved October 29, 2024, from @kathmandupost website: https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/11/12/brahmins-and-chhetris-continue-to-dominate-entry-into-civil-service

Tharu D. (2023). Labour migration: a socio-cultural factor for social transformation in Banke district, Nepal. Sociol Int J. 2023;7(1):13-20. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2023.07.00319