

# A Survey on Nepali Migrants in India: An Empirical Study

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## Abstract

*This article examines the status of Nepali migrants in Delhi-NCR, India. Due to open border, shorter distance and long-established social network, migration from Nepal to India has been unending. India has been an origin and destination country for large numbers of migrants. A treaty in 1950, between Nepal and India facilitates movement between Nepal and India. This paper analyzed the nature and pattern of migrants' employment, education, social network, and causes of migration. Nevertheless, the improved income level, the condition of most of the migrant workers is deplorable, most of them are staying together in either poor rented houses or at slums with sharing rooms without proper provision of hygienic sanitation. Social networks are the major entry point for getting jobs, shelter and loans and for saving money. Nepali migrants in Delhi are working for basic survival rather than improvement in their living standards.*

**Keywords:** Migration, open border, decision, social network, 1950 treaty

## Introduction

International labor migration from Nepal has been quite diversified as to the nature of works. Those forms range from military recruitment to domestic labor (Kansakar, 2003). However, the history of Nepali migration to India is sketchy and incomplete because the open border and the lack of a registration system make it difficult to establish the size of the labor migration (Subedi, 2002). It is found that the destination of major Nepali migrants was initially to India, which has now expanded to almost all countries of the world. However, there is uniqueness between Nepali migration to India and the rest of the world.

Migration between Nepal and India is the result of various social and political agreements between the two countries. The 1950 peace and friendship treaty between Nepal and India and vast social networks facilitate the movement of people across the borders. Keeping open border between Nepal and India is the product of the shared culture of the colonial past (Bashyal, 2014). It has been said that the open border between Nepal and India is not only the outcome of security needs and political and historical reasons but also a necessity for each country. Considering the geographic situation of Nepal and India, an open border facilitates the movement of peoples from one country to another also supports their economic and religious needs (Rajbahak, 1992).

Migration is the cross-cultural and historical phenomenon; it contributes to human livelihood. Due to poverty, unemployment, declining natural resources, and also the Maoist insurgency, labour migration has become an important livelihood strategy in Nepal. Migration to India has a long history (Kansakar, 2003). Choice and destination are dependent on the economic and social resources and the power of potential migrants and their families. Open border and socio-cultural similarities have encouraged migration between two countries for generations. In this study, the author contributes to understanding the process of migration and its contribution to the livelihoods of people from rural areas of Nepal to India.

The early migration from Nepal to India was also because of high taxation and extreme exploitation of common peasants in Nepal. Indebtedness and lack of income to pay the taxes pushed many people to work in India, Sikkim and Bhutan (Bashyal, 2014). This period continued between 1846 to 1951, a period when the Rana family was in rule. When the country opened to the outside world in the 1950s, people went out to foreign countries for employment and income. Until 1990, it was difficult to get a passport for ordinary people (Adhikari & Gurung, 2009).

## **Methods and Materials**

Many researches show that international migration is increasingly a livelihood strategy (Thieme, 2006; Sharma, 2007). Livelihood issues are related to one's capabilities, access to assets and entitlements as well as opportunities for income generations. Either by individuals or households, decision to migration is undertaken for both economic and social reasons (Thieme, 2006; Sen & Sieber, 2007).

A livelihood strategy is a continuous process, which ranges from struggle to survival, human security and development. Livelihood strategies and outcomes can be positive and negative. In recent years, a few scholars have studied mobility from the livelihood's perspective providing useful insights into how people make decisions about movement and consider social, economic and cultural factors that shape their mobility (Thieme, 2006).

Neither historical nor contemporary Nepali migration to India is exclusively about labor. A large number of Nepalis cross the border for other purposes, including medical, educational, pilgrimage, family contact, and employment in multiple sectors. More than 58 % of migrants who come to India come in pursuit of the uplifting the economic status of their family. Most of the migrants' report that limited source of income, inadequate land; unemployment and lack of skill are major factors to push them to India (Bashyal, 2014). The runaway (*bhagne*) culture among the young boys is dominant in rural Nepal and is also one of the main causes of migration of rural Nepali people to India. Many frustrated youngsters do run away from family and end up being laborers in cities of Nepal and India (Sharma, 2007).

Political and societal factor plays crucial role in migration process. In connection to that special interest is focused on the structuration- theory where the human agent and structure plays an important role. Structuration theory is an approach to social theory concerned with the intersection between knowledgeable and capable social agents and the wider social systems and structures in which they are implicated (Gregory, 1994). Structuration theory by Giddens as a method has been used to both macro and micro influences of migration into a more complete explanation of the migration decision-making process. It is a multi-method approach to migration studies is appropriate to understanding the motives of migrants since it not only addresses the stated concerns of the migrants, but also looks at wider societal issues that influence migration in a tacit manner (Tammaru & Sjoberg, 1999).

Despite the importance of Nepali migration to India, it is noticeable that there are very few researches about the migration process and situation of Nepalese migrants in India. This study carried out in 2016 to 2017 among migrants in Delhi, India. This research is descriptive. The data are collected from primary and secondary sources. This survey was taken from April 2016 to November 2017 in Delhi-National Capital Region of India. The survey is based on purposive and drawn from the snowball method. Total respondents are 300 in Delhi, from the national capital region of India.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Nepali migrants in Delhi**

Delhi-National Capital Region is the capital city of India and the most populated country in the world. It is a large metropolitan city, where about 13 million people reside. The ever-increasing crime-graph, mal-functioning public service utilities, corruption, absence of or non-functioning social safety net for a large majority of low-income families in slums, vulnerable state of physical and social infrastructure etc., are destructive factors of Delhi (Bashyal, 2014).

The Indian census of 2001 counts roughly 50,000 Nepalis living in Delhi. Referring to the estimates by some Nepalese migrant associations in Delhi, the number varies from 200,000 to 500,000 (Thieme, 2003). During the research, many organizations mentioned that there should be at least 3000,000 Nepalis living in Delhi.

Nepali migrants' population in India is undocumented so as the number of total Nepali migrants in India is also debatable. GEFONT (1998) report has estimated that there are 2.8 million Nepali migrants in India. Another estimate is 1.3 million (Seddon, Adhikari, & Gurung, 2002) and Nepali government data shows 5,89,050 in the census report of 2001 (CBS, 2002). Adhikari & Gurung (2009) estimated that there are 0.2 million Nepalis in Delhi and its vicinity. Bashyal (2020) estimated that there are about 0.3 million Nepalis staying or working in Delhi.

**Table 1.** Number of Nepali migrants in India

Source	Year	Nepali migrants in India
GEFONT	1998	2.8 million
Kaushik	2004	2.5 million
Seddon, Adhikari & Gurung	2002	1.3 million
CBS (Nepal)	2001	5,89,050
Adhikari and Gurung	2009	0.2 million (In Delhi only)

**Source:** Compiled by different sources

Large numbers of migrants by age were the age of 20 to 40 years. Some other researchers reported that more than 70% of Nepali migrants come to India when they were in between the age of 10 to 20 years (Adhikari & Gurung, 2009). In this study, among the total respondents, 50% are in the age group of 20-40 years old followed by 30% are above 40 years old and, 20% are less than 20 years old. The lowest age among the respondents is reported to be 15 years old who were found to be working in an unskilled area such as in hotels and restaurants.

Among the total respondents, 68% were married, followed by unmarried 32%. Nepali society is highly patriarchal which is reflected in strong male domination in every domestic and public sphere. Generally, they don't have a tradition to send their female members away from home for employment and other economic activities although this is gradually changing to some extent in recent time. A married woman may be able to work when husband and family support her. In this survey, the female respondents are very few. There were only 20 female respondents. All of the female respondents were living together with their family members or relatives in Delhi. One of their male family members or with relatives either supported them. Nearly all women workers came to

stay with their husbands or parents and started to work. Female works are working as a factory worker with their husband or house cleaners; a few were working as domestic helper.

### **Education status of migrants**

Contrary to popular belief that the migrant workers are “illiterate factory workers”, the literacy among the sample migrants in this study is a bit high (70%), compared to the national literacy average of Nepal that is recorded as 67 percent in 2011 (CBS, 2011). There are some factory workers, who have completed the higher secondary education. Their level of understanding is relatively good. Table 2 shows that only 8 percent of migrant workers are illiterate and they came to India long before. Some of the respondents who have passed high school are in better jobs like office clerks and accountants.

**Table 2.** Education status of migrants

<b>Educational status</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Illiterate	24	8
Read and write or <5 class)	210	70
High School<10 class	54	18
Above High School	12	4
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey.

Seventy percent of migrants expressed the benefits of staying in Delhi. They seemed to be aware of the importance of education and they have been trying their level best to educate their children. As a result, nearly all the children were enrolled in different schools in Delhi. Most of them are attending different government schools.

### **Social network in the migration process to India**

Knowledge about destination appears to be very important for migrant workers. In the first instance, how he/she got information and what was the influence that led to the desire to migrate is the most relevant question. During the survey, it was found that most of the migrants were influenced by their friends (53%) to come India followed by family (35%) and relatives (14%), which implies that at least the first-time migrant wants someone to be there at the destination. Many of the respondents had an opportunity to reach Delhi and contact one or more acquaintances. But, few of them reported that they were not able to reach their contact person and were helped by locals.

### Reasons for migration to India

Table 3 shows that the majority of (58%) migrated because of economic reasons followed by 32% by social and others were 10%. Economic factors are generally considered as push factors in migration. A lack of job opportunities and financial scarcity at home is crucial.

**Table 3.** Reasons for migration to India

Reasons	Number	(%)
Economic	174	58
Social	96	32
Others	30	10,
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey.

To elaborate further, respondents reported that limited source of income, inadequate land. Unemployment and lack of skill are the major push factors. The unequal distribution and discriminatory socio-economic practices also pushed people from their homes to India. Furthermore, among the respondents, the social network played a vital role to attract the people and choose Delhi as a destination.

In Nepali society, there has been a trend of young boys running away (*bhagne*) from home without informing parents. This has become a tradition among the school going boys. In this way, many grown-up boys drop out of school and come to India. Apart from that, another important reason is reported to be the inter-caste love or marriage, in that situation, the couple felt difficult to stay in the village. In such a case, they fled to India.

### Duration of staying at Delhi

The duration of stay in India has been divided into three major categories; short term, medium-term and long term. Here, in the first category, short term, migrants work for more than 6 months and less than 5 years. In this study, there are no seasonal migrants, so it has been divided into yearly basis. 28% of the respondents belonged to the first category (Table 4). In this category, the respondents were reported to be working in temporary and less secure jobs. The wages and salary are also reported in such jobs.

Migrants, who have stayed in India for more than five years to ten years, are categorized Medium-term migrants. Migrants in this category were found to be working in relatively secure jobs such as factory workers, government and semi-government sectors, 36% of them belonged to this category.

**Table 4.** Staying duration in India

<b>Duration</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Less than 5 years (Short term)	84	28
5-10 years (Medium term)	108	36
More than 10 years (Long term)	128	44
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey

Migrants who were living for more than 10 years are categorized as long-term migrants. 44% age in this category. Majorly of the migrants in this category have permanent jobs in formal institutions like factories, banks, non-government organizations (NGO's) and some are in security sectors. They prefer to continue this type of job.

### **Decision in participation in migration**

Although the economic problem appeared as a major factor for migrating to India, there was a mixed response among the respondents. The 38% of the respondents reported that it was their family decision to migrate, followed by self-decision (30%), friends (26%) and with other (6%) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Decision to migrate

<b>Deciding factor</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Self	90	30
Family	114	38
Friend	78	26
Others	18	6
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey.

### **Importance of social networks in getting jobs in India**

Getting a job seems to be a tough task. It is found that relatives, family, and friends are the most convenient and reliable sources of information. They also help and introduce the new migrant to the probable employer. The choice of job for the newcomer depends on the type of job their friends or family members have already become familiar too. Gradually, after a few years of work, many of the respondents could find the job of their choice. Social network plays a vital role to find jobs. As mentioned in the (Table 6), it is reported that 36% respondents got a job through relatives followed by 32% by the help of family members and 16% with the help of friends and others respectively. It is also observed that the job of a security guard (*Chaukidar*) has been passed from one generation to another generation. In a study of Nepali migrants in Uttarakhand, Brusle

found that they sell their job to another person or lease out for a specific period. The job of a guard (Chaukidar) could fetch from Indian Rs. 5,000 to 20,000 if they sale that job (Brusle, 2004).

**Table 6.** Role of social networks to getting jobs in India

<b>Who supported</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Family Members	96	32
Relatives	108	36
Friends	48	16
Others	48	16
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey.

### **Accommodation, water and sanitation status of migrants in India**

The living condition of most of the migrants is reported to be pathetic. Most of the respondents who are working in industries are staying in the poor living condition in the slums known as Jhuggi/Jhopadi colony. Such JJ colony house seems miserable, small room, covered by tin, with poor ventilation, height is also very low, lack of toilet facility, drain attached with each room. Generally, it is found that one family shares a single room. It is reported that more than 4-5 individuals share one room even when they are not living with family. Migrants are staying in JJ colony 44%, followed by rented room by 40%, domestic helper generally stay in owner's home 10% and few of them (6%) have their flat (Table 7).

It was also reported that there was also a lack of regular water supply in the JJ settlement area. Water tanks are providing every day by Delhi Municipal Corporation. But it is very difficult to collect water for them. Very often fighting occurs during taping the water. Contaminated water at times is one of the major causes of their health problem, as they have no other option for drinking, cooking and cleaning water. Diarrhea, thus, has been on the top of the illnesses they suffer.

**Table 7.** Accommodation status of migrants in India

<b>Accommodation</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Jhuggi/Jhopadi	132	44
Rented	120	40
Owner's home	30	10
Own flat	18	6
Total	300	100

**Source:** Field survey.

### Frequency of visit to Nepal

It appears that Nepali migrants in India visit their hometown quite frequently as more than two-third of the respondents reported that they visit their hometown at least once in a year. Table 8 depicts that 24% migrants go to Nepal more than once in a year, 44% visits Nepal once in a year and 32% go to a home in every two years (Table 8). Some of the respondents also had been to Qatar for employment some years before are now working in Delhi. He said that he could not visit home so frequently from Qatar but as he is in India, he can go home any time he likes.

**Table 8.** Frequency of visit to Nepal

Frequency	Number of respondents	(%)
More than 1 year	72	24
Once in a year	132	44
Once in Two year	96	32
Never	-	-

**Source:** Field Survey

### Nature of employment

Mostly, the Nepali migrants sell their manual work. However, 6% of migrants have their business firms where they employ other laborers. Saving the money from the jobs, they started their own business. It is obvious that compared to other labor migrants, these migrants who have become businessmen earn more money. Due to their higher earning, they can personally decide how and where they invest their earnings.

### Conclusion

Nepali migration to India is remaining important to the employment and income. Nepali migration to India has been continuous phenomenon, as a result of which the working diaspora has spread all across India. In fact, spreading of Nepali workers in India is also the result of open border that India and Nepal share. Also, there is no legal restriction in the movement of people between these two countries. Thus, crossing the border has been a common and integral process attached to the social life.

The nature of Nepali migration is circulatory (*aaune-jane*). Most of the Nepali migrants start working in India at a younger age, and they continue to travel back and forth until they get old. This research reveals that more than 50% migrants travel home at least once annually. More than 58% of migrants who come to India come in a pursuit of uplifting economic status of their family. Migrants limited source of income, inadequate land; unemployment and lack of skill are major factors to push them to India. The tendency of running away from home has added to the numbers of Nepali unskilled

manual laborers in the cities like Delhi. In Nepal, family decision has powerful role to decide whether one should migrate or not. Self-decision of the individual matters less. Due to this also, many people leave their homes without informing their parents and other family members.

Above all, the trends, patterns, causes and consequences of Nepali migration to India have not changed remarkably even after many years of migration. Nepali migrants, these days, show more attachment to their family back home and also started in education of their children. Recent development is that some migrants are involving in self-employed business in India.

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