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Impacts of Foreign Employment on Social Cohesion: Insights from a Rural Village of Eastern Nepal

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Abstract

Foreign employment has brought significant economic benefits and changes on the socio-economic situation of migrant households in Nepal. However, studies regarding the impact of foreign employment on social cohesion are limited. Hence, this study focuses on the impact of social cohesions in households and community levels taking the case of a large rural village from eastern Nepal. The study is based on qualitative research methodology applying three different but interconnected levels (individual, community and institution) in social cohesion perspectives. The study has found that household split (Anshabanda) is taking place much earlier in migrated families. The trend and volume of foreign employment-induced divorce cases among migrant couples are increasing rapidly compared to non-migrant households. Traditional cultures and practices are disappearing due to the absence of a large number of youths in the village. The study concludes that people's motivation, perceptions, norms and values have changed over the time at both individual and community levels towards local cultures, borrowing behaviours and some other socio-cultural activities and performance, especially among migrant households and communities.

Introduction

Nepal has more than 200 years of migration history, where people have been migrating from the hills leaving their land in search of work elsewhere, within Nepal and outside the country (Regmi, 1978). The first wave of migration started in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was the result of heavy taxes, political instability, state policies and agrarian changes (Pant, 2006 & Sharma, 2012). In this early stage of migration, the opportunity to work in tea plantations, coal mining and construction work attracted a large number of Nepalese labourers to India (Sharma, 2012).

The formal and temporary migration saw a rise when individuals began working in the British Army after the Sugauli Treaty was signed on December 2, 1815. This agreement allowed Britain to recruit Gurkhas for military duty (Pant, 2006). The demand for young soldiers from Nepal surged significantly during both the First and Second World Wars. Although opportunities for military out-migration have decreased in recent years, there is still a steady flow of people going abroad for wage labour.

Only after the 1990s did both policymakers and academics start to acknowledge the impact of remittances sent by Nepalese workers abroad on enhancing the living conditions of families, especially in rural regions (MoLT, 1999).

The late 1980s indicated a new phase of overseas labour migration from Nepal. During this period, the demand for workers surged significantly in the growing economies of Southeast Asia. Additionally, infrastructure development initiatives in West Asia, powered by oil trade revenues, provided further employment opportunities (Bhandari, 2003). Conversely, Nepal faced a low rate of job creation despite a noticeable increase in the labour force. In response, the Nepalese government opted to encourage and regulate foreign employment as a strategy to tackle the severe unemployment problem facing Nepalese youth, aiming to derive economic benefits for Nepal and its citizens (Subedi, 2003).

Nepalese youths are migrating to more than 150 countries for employment. The six GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries and Malaysia are the preferred destinations for the very large majority of the migrants' workers (MoLESS, 2022). Although the labour migration act was promulgated in 1985 to govern and address labour migration of Nepalese youth beyond India, the government of Nepal promoted foreign employment only after the establishment of democracy in 1990 (Kunwar, 2020). Since 2008/2009, the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has permitted 52,05,498 "new entry" labour approvals to Nepali workers seeking jobs abroad (MoLESS, 2022 & Bhattarai et al., 2023). The volume and trend of foreign employment

are continuously increasing and migrants working abroad are sending money back home. The remitted money increased exponentially from NPR 2.1 billion (USD 16 million) in 1990/91 to NPR 961 billion (USD 7.5 billion) in 2020/21 consolidating the nation's economy and contributing to the nation's foreign exchange reserve (MoESS, 2022). The inflow of international remittances has brought significant social and economic benefits to migrant families living in Nepal (Sijapati et al., 2017).

However, over the last decades, several socio-cultural issues caused by a massive outflow of young adults for foreign employment have been noticed in the migrant's origin communities and villages in the rural areas of Nepal (Koirala et al., 2017). The absence of family members due to foreign employment observed negative impacts on households and social structure, leading to issues like family breakdown, social isolation and other socio-cultural dynamics (Bhandari, 2010). Despite the both economic benefits and negative socio-cultural impacts of foreign employment on migrant families and communities, extensive studies and research (Adhikari et al., 2023; Adhikari et al., 2004; Baral et al., 2023; Baral, 2021; Bashyal, 2020; Kollmair et al., 2006; Kunwar, 2022; Pant, 2006; Seddon et al., 2002; Sharma et al., 2021; Sijapati et al., 2015; Sijapati et al., 2017; Subedi, 2003; Thieme, 2006; Thieme & Wyss, 2005; Kunwar, 2020; Sharma, 2012; Khatiwada, 2023; Kansakar, 2005;

Khatiwada, 2014) conducted on foreign employment in Nepal are concentrated on causes, directions, volume, trends, patterns, remittances inflows, expenditure and investment areas and economic impacts. Very limited studies on foreign employment are focused on its impact on social and cultural dynamics. In this context, this study, conducted in a rural village in Eastern Nepal tried to address the following research question:

To what extent does the absence of young adults from the village for employment abroad influence social cohesion within their families and communities?

This research question aims to explore and examine the effects of foreign employment on various aspects of social cohesion in rural settlements in Nepal, such as community interaction and relationships, events, family dynamics and overall societal harmony.

Conceptual Approaches

Le Bon's theory of collective behaviour and contagion (1897), alongside Durkheim's ideas on strong social solidarity, civic unity, responsive democracy, and impartial rule of law (1897), represent foundational theories and concepts in the study of social cohesion. Durkheim further defines social cohesion as interrelationships and linkages between the individual and society based on wealth, ethnicity race, gender and the existence of social togetherness. The Council of Europe (CE) defines social cohesion as the

inclusive and equitable well-being of the people (CE, 2008).

Social cohesion is a common feature and behaviour characterized by positive social relations, bonds, individuality and an orientation towards the common good (Moustakas, 2023). Broadly, social cohesion is defined through the concept of “solidarity”, “togetherness”, tolerance” and “harmonious co-existence” (Bauloz et al., 2020). In a neighbourhood, social cohesion isn't always beneficial during modernization and rehabilitation processes (Ogdul, 2000). It refers to the level of individual engagement in community social groups and characterizes social cohesion as involvement in public matters, civic duties, or participation in public life. Consequently, social cohesion lacks a consistent and precise definition. Much of the research on social cohesion remains inconsistent, unclear, and challenging to implement (Moody & White, 2003).

Migration is a social phenomenon that leads to physical transformations in the place of origin and results in notable shifts in social structures and behaviours (Gulerce et al., 2022). Hence, individuals and communities often consider it in a negative sense and make narratives like “a person away from his homeland where he was born and grew up”, “being homeless”, “not belonging anywhere”, “helpless person”, “a person who is forced to leave his homeland”.

There are different approaches to understanding the complex structure of social cohesion. The Social Network Analysis (SNA) approach is one of the approaches that is widely used in social science disciplines to understand the individual, micro, meso and macro level network of society (Persell, 1990; Phillips, 2006). Understanding social cohesion through the three levels of social structure i.e. individual, community and institution perspectives is continuously practiced by researchers and is commonly found in social science literature (Fonseca et al., 2018). Different social factors are linked with these three levels. Fonseca writes that the level of the individual in social cohesion can be measured through the degree of like-dislike, individual behaviours and participation, sense of belonging, face-to-face communication, initiative, inclusion, attitudes and personal feelings, recognition and legitimacy towards a person and individuals.

Initially, social cohesion can be understood through social capital, friends' networks, the strength of social relations, social bonds, social environment, caring, the pressure of orthodoxy, reciprocal loyalty and solidarity, formal/informal control, moral behaviour and norms, common goals which are come under the level of community (Fonseca et al., 2018; Durkheim, 1897). The level of the institution in social cohesion study consists of voting, social behaviour, social harmony and peace, inclusiveness,

trust, multiculturalism and exclusion (Fonseca et al., 2018).

In this context, this study tries to explore and examine the impact of foreign employment on social cohesion through the level of individual, community and institution perspectives.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative approach, gathering both primary and secondary data through focus group discussions, interviews, census information, and various reports. Qualitative research methods offer contextual and personalized explanations, helping to uncover fresh insights into individuals' experiences, lives, emotions, and communities (Hay & Cope, 2021). It can be identified and examined through the different levels of social interaction and informal volunteering of the local people in their socio-cultural and communal activities (Muntaner & Lynch, 1999).

Therefore, to explore and examine different levels of social cohesion, 4 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in June 2023 at major settlements and market centres named *Himali Chowk*, *Sombare*, *Sagarmatha* and *Gyane Chowk* where people often gather for shopping, chitchat and drink tea and coffee. To obtain a balanced perception of the local households on the impact of foreign employment, each focus group was further divided into two sub-groups of migrant and non-migrant households. Each sub-group had 4-6 people and of the total

48 participants, 23 people participated from migrant and 25 people participated from non-migrant households in the discussion. Location of all focus group discussions are situated along the Mechi Highway and cover entire study areas proportionately. People's participation levels and continuity & changes in sociocultural, religious and community activities in the last 7-10 years were obtained through focus group discussions. Moreover, people's narratives and cases related to foreign employment are also carefully noted during the discussion and informal conversations through the individual, community and institution level perspectives.

An interview involves a verbal exchange of details and serves as an outstanding way to gather insights into events, perspectives, and personal experiences (Hay, 2005). Hence, 13 key informant interviews were conducted with head teachers of local schools, managers of local financial institutions, local political leaders, social workers, traders and ward chairpersons and/or members representing different community groups, sectors and institutions. The conservation with key informants further verified the information and data acquired from FGDs. Prior consent of the interviewee was taken for time, date and location. During the interview, an audio or video tape recorder was not used. Most of the interviews were completed around 30-40 minutes.

Demographic and other relevant secondary data were collected from the national population census of different times and other published and unpublished studies and reports. Qualitative descriptive textual analysis methods were used to explain and analyse the information obtained through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and informal conversations by using different cases, metaphors, traditional myths, narratives and proverbs. Though the study was concentrated in Prithvinagar areas (present wards 1 and 2 of Bhadrapur Municipality), demographic data and other socio-economic indicators of Bhadrapur Municipality are presented and analysed accordingly.

Study Area

Prithvinagar is a former VDC (Village Development Committee) and a large village comprising several other small settlements named *Himali Chowk*, *Aahhame Line*, *Bhrikuti Basti*, *Guranshpur*, *Dasharathapur*, *Sombare*, *Sita Chowk*, *Charaali Chowk*, *Kamal Dhap*, *Amarbasti*, *Sagarmatha*, *Gyane Chowk*, *Bhimnagar*, *Gaurishankar*, *Diyalo Basti* and *Kalyan Basti*. It is a planned resettlement VDC where the government of Nepal resettled 931 households in 1641 hectares of land through the Nepal Resettlement Project in 1970-1974 (Kansakar, 1979). Located in the southeastern part of the Jhapa district in Koshi Province, Prithvinagar is situated just a few kilometres from the border between India and Nepal (Figure 1).

During the local government restructuring process in 2016, Prithvinagar VDC was merged into Bhadrapur Municipality which is the district headquarters of Jhapa District. North-South Mechi Highway passes through Prithvinagar.

In 2011, Prithvinagar VDC had 3655 households and 15284 population (CBS, 2011). After merging with Bhadrapur Municipality in 2016, the entire VDC was divided into two wards (Ward 1 and 2) of Bhadrapur Municipality. Now these two wards have 4082 households and 16409 population (NSO, 2021). Since only ward-level households and population are available in the census report of 2021, other demographic indicators of Bhadrapur Municipality are analysed here. Bhadrapur Municipality has 70913 population and 17321 households. The average household size and sex ratio is 4.09 and 91.54 respectively. The annual population growth rate is 0.61 which is lower than Koshi Province (0.86%), Jhapa District (1.97%) and the national level (0.92%). The literacy rate for the entire population aged 5 years and older is 82.5% of which male literacy is 88.6% and female literacy is 77.71%, which is higher than Koshi province (79.7%) and national level (76.2%).

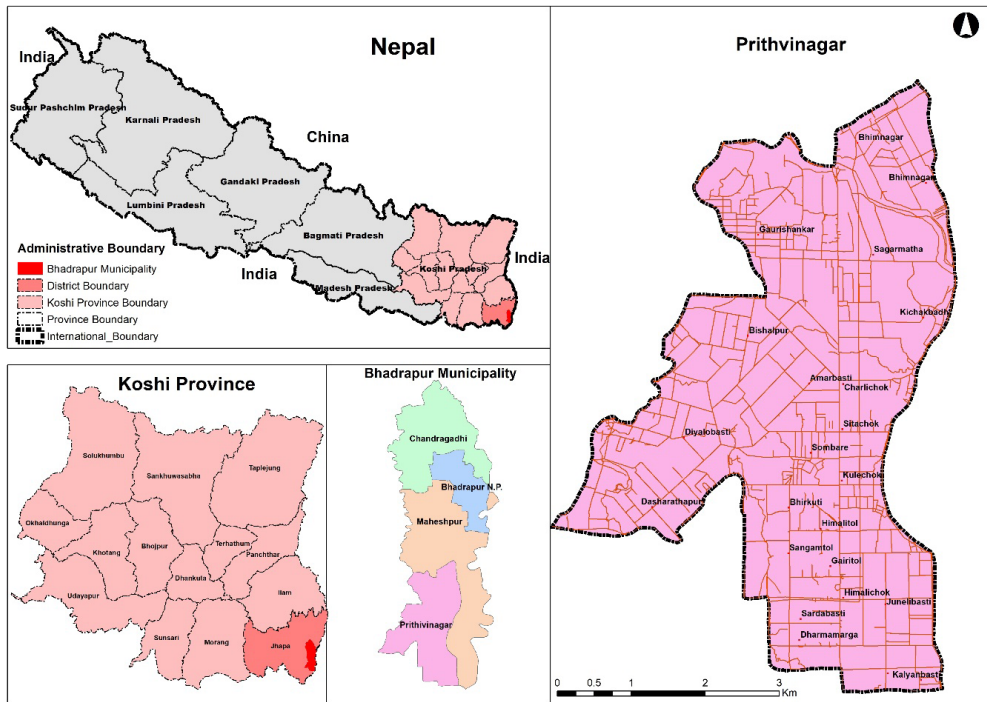


Figure 1: Location of the Study Area: Prithvinagar

Bhadrapur Municipality has caste/ethnic diversity. Chhetri (16.4%) and Brahmin Hill (11.3%) are the two major caste ethnic groups ranked in first and second position respectively (NSO, 2021). Limbu, Rai, Gurung, Magar and Newar are other notable caste/ethnic groups residing in the municipality. Marriage (47.4%), dependent (15.6%) and returning home (13.5%) are three major reasons for migration followed by work/employment (10.1%). Agriculture, remittances, business and wage labour are the major sources of income for local households (Bhandari, 2010).

Of the total households, the number of households with at least one member absent abroad is 27.5%. Likewise, 9.09% population is absent in Bhadrapur Municipality. Both absent households (22.6%) and absent population (6.9%) of Koshi Province are lower than Bhadrapur Municipality (NSO, 2021). Middle-East countries are the most popular destination for 55.8% people followed by India and ASEAN countries by 7.9% and 5.2% respectively. Only 29.3% economically active population 10 years and above are engaged in skilled agriculture, forestry and fishery occupation (NSO, 2021). While conducting fieldwork, many of the agricultural lands in the Prithvinagar

appeared barren even though it was the season to cultivate and ready the fields for rice planting. According to key informant interviews, it was revealed that numerous farmers have recently given up on farming because the workforce has decreased as a result of foreign employment opportunities. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews confirmed this assertion of decreased agricultural engagement of local households. In casual discussions, residents elaborated that working abroad has become the primary job in Prithvinagar in recent times.

Service, dairy farming, vegetable cultivation, and tea production are other significant occupations (Bhandari, 2007). Nowadays, many rice, maize and wheat fields are converted into tea gardens. Until the early 1990s, the majority of houses were constructed from wood and thatched roofs. and by 2020 these old thatched roof houses were replaced by 58.5% galvanized sheet and 40.1% reinforced cement concrete roofs (NSO, 2021). Settlements are developed along the roadsides in a linear pattern. Major market centres named *Himali Chowk*, *Sombare*, *Charaali*, *Sagarmatha*, *Gyane Chowk* are situated along the North-South Mechi Highway.

Results and Discussion

Beginning of Foreign Employment in the Study Area

Before 1990, local youths were recruited to the Indian and British army as foreign employment and some other seasonally

migrated to North East India (especially Assam State), Delhi, Punjab and Hariyana State of India for agriculture wage labour and household jobs taking the benefit of Indian Nepal open border (Bhandari, 2007).

Large-scale foreign employment in Prithvinagar began in the early 1990s. As overseas work, particularly in Saudi Arabia, was just starting, some entrepreneurs ventured into Prithvinagar seeking land ideal for tea cultivation. The primary motive for investors was the land, which was relatively inexpensive compared to nearby areas at that time (Bhandari, 2007). Additionally, Prithvinagar was linked to the district headquarters via a gravel road and had communication facilities. Moreover, the land was well-suited for tea cultivation.

Many local residents grabbed this chance; numerous families sold their less fertile land to fund travel abroad for work opportunities. Prithvinagar exemplifies a place where overseas employment has surged significantly in recent years. Young people are sending remittances back to their village, investing in new homes, land, or other profit-generating ventures. Conversely, agricultural production is on the decline, and traditional occupations are being abandoned due to a significant migration of the workforce to Kathmandu, nearby towns, and foreign countries (Bhandari, 2010). The reliance of remaining family members on remittance income is steadily increasing. Additionally, villagers feel

that the growing trend of labour migration has impacted social cohesion and unity. Families are becoming fragmented, and interactions within and between communities are gradually diminishing.

Parma: The Customary Method of Exchanging Labour

In Prithvinagar, *Parma* was a traditional custom commonly celebrated until 7-8 years before. It is the reciprocal labour exchange system in Nepalese agricultural society (Bhattarai, 2006). In the past, the community celebrated it as an agricultural festival. It highlighted how locals supported each other during times of labour scarcity, demonstrating their solidarity and cooperation in the communities.

During FGDs, one participant mentioned that in the past, everyone was keen on *Parma*, and he recalled how his son cried a lot when he wasn't allowed to attend. For the local school children and young adults, *Parma* offered a great chance to come together, sing songs, share jokes, and spread gossip. People would prepare special dishes such as *Chamre Bhat* (fried rice) and *Gundruk Ko Achar* (a pickle made from fermented and dried vegetables) for the occasion (Bhandari, 2010).

In the FGDs, participants from both migrant and non-migrant groups were asked about the *Parma* system. They described it as *Pareko Belama Saghaune*, meaning to assist someone in need.

Parma is typically practiced during peak agricultural seasons, particularly during paddy planting and harvesting. It involves a mutual exchange of labour where an individual works for another household and, in return, is entitled to receive the same number of labourers. In this paper, it functioned as a key parameter to evaluate interactions at both the individual and communal levels among local households.

Mrs. Khanal, a 59-year-old housewife, mentioned that a decade ago, she had to participate in Parma for at least 15 days and receive the same number of workers for her rice planting. Now, her daughter is reluctant to join Parma. She has college studies and feels embarrassed by the idea. Listening to her mother, the daughter added that there are often strangers in the fields, and she finds it embarrassing to work as a Parma and volunteer for neighbours.

The previously referenced case illustrates how this traditional form of cooperation (Messerschmidt, 1981) as a *Parma* system is declining at both individual and community levels in different generations in the village. Around 8-10 years ago, individuals took pride in being *Parma* labourers, and the amount of time they spent working in this role was seen as a symbol of social prestige in the community (Bhandari, 2007). During FGDs, participants of migrant groups informed that, nowadays, the *Parma* system rarely exists in migrant households and communities. On the

other hand, of the total 25 participants of non-migrant groups, 6 participants informed that they still practice the *Parma* system during peak agricultural season in the village. Key informants verified this statement and said that a few cases of the *Parma* system still exist in non-migrant households and marginalized communities in Prithvinagar. Above mentioned case as well as individual and community level factors in social cohesion obtained from FGDs and key informants depict the decreasing trend of the *Parma* system in the rural settlements of the study area.

Nowadays, migrant households have money and, on most occasions, they prefer to hire workers for households and agricultural work rather than go for *Parma*. As a result, interaction among the households and communities is decreased substantially both at individual and community levels due to the absence of young adults in the village and the sense of togetherness and cooperation is fading away.

Anshabanda: The Household Split

The provision of equal rights for sons and daughters on parental property is considered a common social phenomenon in Nepal. The husband, wife, father, mother, son, and daughter are responsible for dividing the property. Normally, the parental property is divided equally among the sons and parents with mutual understanding and the family needs. Consequently, *Anshabanda* represents

more than just the division of a household. It also signifies the legal separation of the parent's assets and land (Bhandari, 2007). During FGDs, the issues of the household split were deliberately raised and the participants widely conferred on this issue. People have witnessed several cases of households split among migrant households in the last 7-8 years and the rate of the split is higher than ever before. To confirm this statement, the issue of the household split was further discussed during key informants' interviews. Key informants claimed that most of the families were extended before the foreign employment of their family members.

Numerous studies have explored the connection between household economic factors, migration, and household division. Research indicates that these elements significantly influence one another, impacting family structures and dynamics (Pearlman et al., 2017). Understanding the link between parental land and foreign employment amid household divisions in Prithvinagar was challenging. Aase's (1996) theory on household fission explores family conflicts arising between brothers who migrate and those who stay at home. How does land relate to migration? In what ways do brothers in a migrant family lose mutual support? And how does household fission happen?

Household separation begins when a family member moves out of the extended family unit. This typically happens when a man leaves home for work, accumulates

significant savings, and opts not to share his earnings with brothers still residing at home. "Household fission" describes a series of steps from marriage leading to the division of property (Aase, 1996). The pace at which this separation unfolds largely centres on the dynamics among the women in the household. If the brothers' wives develop friendships, the separation process is slowed down; if not, they may pressure their husbands to construct separate residences for them (Aase, 1996).

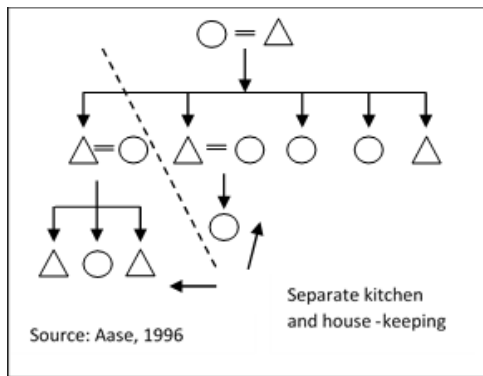


Figure 2: Early Stage of Household Fission

In the beginning, the whole family makes a collective decision to send a male member abroad for employment. In the household fission process, family conflict begins among the brothers/sons usually after the migrant's first holiday and finally ends with the fragmentation of the parent's property and separate new house. Focus group discussions and interviews with key informants revealed that before migrating, most nuclear families resided within joint family arrangements.

After one brother in a family migrates, the remaining siblings and parents either cultivate the jointly-owned land or, if there's insufficient family labour, lease it to non-migrant households. Once the migrant has saved a significant amount, he sends money back home as part of an unspoken agreement with his family. Typically, after two years, the migrant returns home for his first holiday, receiving a warm welcome from family, friends, and neighbours.

During his visit, he often focuses on getting married with family support, or if he is already married, he works on clearing any debts incurred to fund his overseas employment. Alternatively, he may invest in *Ghaderi*, a plot of land intended for building a future home. If he already owns a *Ghaderi*, he might put his savings toward constructing a new house. Up to this point, everything aligns with the family's plans, and everyone appears satisfied (Bhandari, 2007). Once the holiday completes, the migrant resumes his job abroad, while the family at home promises to care for his new wife. From this point on, the migrant no longer sends all his earnings to his brothers and parents. Instead, he may send money to his wife or deposit it directly into the bank account he established during his first holiday (Bhandari, 2010). In most cases, if the husband directly sends money to his wife, the wife tries to live separately and the early stage of household fission appears in the migrant family (Figure 2).

As long as siblings residing at home don't receive money, electronic gadgets, or gifts from their siblings working overseas as expected, doubts begin to arise. They start believing that their hard work in the village is futile and that they are missing out on earning opportunities. Meanwhile, their sibling abroad enjoys a good income, a happy life, and, crucially, retain equal rights to their parents' property and land. Consequently, brothers in a joint or extended family begin to live independently, leading to the household splitting and the division of land among siblings, as described in the "theory of household fission."

Mr. Rana, 68 years old, is a former Indian army member. He has three sons and a daughter. Two of his sons and the daughter are already married. His youngest son is pursuing a bachelor's degree in the nearby city of Bhadrapur. Three years ago, his eldest son, Laxman, married his girlfriend. At that time, Laxman was unemployed, and Mr. Rana advised him to work abroad. He mortgaged his land to a local bank to finance his son's move to Qatar. Now, Laxman sends money to his wife. Meanwhile, Mr. Rana is responsible for making regular monthly payments to the bank, and he has no access to his son's earnings. A few months back, he requested some money from his daughter-in-law. She threatened that if he asked for money again, she would return to her parents' house. Mr. Rana mentioned that his daughter-in-law is sending his son's income to her mother. He is deeply

concerned as his family is drifting apart, and the bank is on the verge of seizing his land if he doesn't settle the entire debt.

The above case shows how a household splits if a migrant sends money to his wife. During FGDs, 13 divorce cases were noticed from the entire study area and all of them were migrant households where at least one member had gone abroad for employment. The participants informed that none of the divorce cases happened in the past associated with foreign employment. As per key informant interviews, such cases apply to most of the migrant households in Prithvinagar where a male member has gone abroad for employment and doesn't share his all income with his parents and other family members. Thus, in Prithvinagar, household split (*Anshabanda*) is happening much earlier in migrated families compared to non-migrant families. Here, community-level factors of social cohesion are observed more responsible for early household fission rather than individual-level factors.

Dhan Nacha: Cultural Dance of Limbu Ethnic Groups

Foreign employment is one of the major and popular livelihood options in the Limbu communities in the study area (Bhandari, 2010). These groups are found in most parts of Prithvinagar, however major concentration of Limbu households are found in the vicinity of *Himali Chowk* and around *Sombare Bazar* area. *Dhan*

Nacha is a popular cultural and traditional dance of Limbu performed usually among young men and women. Participants dressed in traditional Lumbu outfits, sit together in line holding each other hands, singing traditional songs and dancing to a beautiful tune called “Palam”. Every year, Limbu community used to perform this cultural dance during major festivals like *Dashain*, *Udhauli Parva* and *Maghe Sankranti*. Until 10 years back, such types of dance were performed in *Himali Chowk* and *Sombare* areas late at night on the day of the weekly periodic market. Gradually, the downfall of the cultural dance began with the increasing outflow of local youths to foreign employment. These days, *Dhan Nach* and the rhythms of *Palam* are on the verge of extinction in the local Limbu community.

During the focus group discussions, participants informed that nowadays *Dhan Nach* is performed only in *Dashain* and *Udhauli* festivals in selected areas, but it has been very hard to find participants. The head teacher of the local high school further confirms that *Dhan Nach* is almost disappearing from the Limbu community due to the massive outflow of local youths for foreign employment.

Mr. D. B. Limbu, aged 68, a retired high school teacher and one of the participants in the focus group discussion said:

Dhan Nach was one of the major cultural events performed and organized every week in Limbu community. People used to share their sorrow and happiness,

exchanged food and traditional attire and most importantly there was good cooperation and interaction among the households and communities. He further said that “*Dhan Nach*” and “*Palam*” were not only a form of entertainment. It’s a symbol of love, emotion, rich cultural heritage and identity where young adults even choose their life partner and should be preserved and transferred to the younger generation. He was very much worried that youths were going abroad for employment and that his rich cultural heritage and identity were dying due to the absence of youths in the village.

From the community-level perspective, both individual and community-level factors of social cohesion like strong social bonds, trust, shared values, recognition and legitimacy, social environment, friendship networks and individual participation are becoming weaker for *Dhan Nach* in the Limbu community.

Increasing Divorce Cases

Of the total population of Nepal, the number of single women has increased from 1.5% to 7.3% between 2011 and 2021 (CBS, 2011; NSO, 2021). These statistics clearly show a huge increment of single women in the last decade. Several studies have shown that increasing divorce rates, migration, foreign employment, death of men during foreign employment, mismatched marriage, child marriage, road accidents and epidemics are the major reasons that contribute growing

number of single women in Nepal. There were 173 divorced, 479 separated and 3659 widow/widower women cases during the last 10 years in Bhadrapur Municipality (NSO, 2021).

When only the husband or wife migrated, the rate of divorce in migrant couples was higher than in non-migrant couples. Especially, when migrated husbands stay outside for longer periods cases of divorce are more likely (Caarls & Mazzucato, 2015). Thus, the issue of increasing cases of divorce among migrant households was rigorously discussed in all 4 FGDs located in *Himali Chowk*, *Sombare*, *Sagarmatha* and *Gyane Chowk*. The discussions traced out several reasons for divorces among the couples whose spouses (either husband or wife) have gone abroad. The reasons are the long stay of migrants abroad, death of a migrated person while working abroad, the huge age gap between couples, irregularity in sending money, differences in education level, extra marital affairs, unmatched economic background of the couple, higher expectations with the migrated person before marriage and conflict with family members. Several divorce cases of migrant couples were recorded during FGDs and key informant interviews and a few of them are as follows:

Miss Karki, aged 29 and a local school teacher got divorced from her husband recently. She got married at the age of 19. Two weeks after her marriage, her husband went to Saudi Arabia and did not return home for 7 years. After returning

to her husband abroad, she started living at the natal house with her parents to continue her studies. Her husband often sent money to his parents saying that his wife was too young and could not handle remitted money.

Mr. Tamang, aged 36, is a returnee migrant from UAE who registered a divorce file in the district court last year. After returning home he came to know that his wife had affairs with the local boy.

Ramesh, aged 33, got married and went to Qatar for foreign employment. He was planning to return home after 3 years but his wife eloped with a local boy before his arrival leaving behind his 4 years son.

Mrs. Rai, aged 32 is a housewife and has two children. For the past eight years, her husband has been employed in Dubai, and he hasn't come back home in the last four years. She came to know that her husband was living together with a Philippine Girl in Dubai. Now she is preparing for divorce.

Above mentioned cases of migrated families indicate that there are several numbers of potential divorce cases linked with foreign employment in the village. FGDs held in different places in the study area have identified 17 divorce cases caused by foreign employment in the last 2 years. The divorce number was very high because such cases were not noticed by villagers in the past. All of the divorce cases belonged to migrant households

and as per the participants, such cases would be expected to increase in days to come.

Most of the key informants and senior citizens of the village were worried about the increasing number of divorce cases triggered by foreign employment in the village. After the enforcement of Nepal Civil Code 2074 BS, a male/husband can directly approach the court for divorce. Therefore, in the coming year, the number of men looking for the help of a court for divorce would increase drastically in the village. In the fiscal year 2068/69 there were only 128 divorce cases registered in Jhapa District Court (SCoN, 2013). But, in FY 2078/79, 1380 divorce cases were registered in Jhapa District Court and among the total divorce cases, more than 70% were attributed to foreign employment (Nepal, 2022). Statistics from the Jhapa District Court also indicate the rapidly increasing number of males seeking a divorce.

Foreign employment has enhanced the economic status and livelihood of local households in Nepal (NPC, 2020). However, the breakdown of families and the separation of married couples have been observed as an adverse impact of labour migration. In most families of migrant workers, grandparents are taking care of their grandchildren in Nepal (Koirala et al., 2017). Information obtained from the field shows that the trend and volume of foreign employment-induced divorce cases among migrant couples are increasing rapidly in Prithvinagar at

the cost of family integration, the future of child education, social cohesiveness, integrity and values both at individual and community levels in social cohesion.

Aicho Paicho: Borrowing Money, Household Goods and Foods

Aicho Paicho is a traditional practice of borrowing money, household goods, food grain, milk, cooking oil, agricultural inputs and bullock carts from neighbours, relatives and friends during plantation and harvesting time, festivals, marriage & baptism, sickness and in the shortage period with the promise to return the same or an equivalent thing within the agreed timeframe. Years ago, such practices had contributed to increasing the interaction and loyalty among the households which had built better social harmony, togetherness and co-existence in the community. But, nowadays, migrants have regular income through remittances and those families having members in foreign employment have less and/ or no practices of *Aicho Paicho* in Prithvinagar compared to non-migrant households. During FGD, participants of migrant households' groups informed that *Aicho Paicho* does not exist in their households and communities. Whereas, of the total 25 non-migrant households, 6 participants informed that they still practice *Aicho Paicho* in their communities and neighbourhoods. This figure indicates that borrowing behaviour still exists in non-migrant households but the proportion of households will

decrease in the future with the increasing volume of foreign employment.

Dependency on traditional money lenders, relatives, friends and neighbours is higher among migrant households compared to non-migrant households because migrant households require a large amount to pay their debts or to finance the prospective migrant of their family (Sijapati et al., 2017). In most cases, large amounts of loans cannot be borrowed from neighbours. In such a situation, migrants' households move to banks and financial institutions and some of them access loans on a collateral basis showing income through remittances.

Mr. Thami, aged 63, a local vegetable farmer mentioned that migrant households have enough money for their livelihood. They can buy anything they need from local shops and markets. *Aicho Paicho* is a shameful practice for them and they are isolating themselves from other non-migrants' households.

The above case of an old farmer shows that *Aicho Paicho* practices are almost disappearing among the migrants' households. Consequently, migrants' households have limited interaction with their neighbours and the sense of togetherness and co-existence is declining gradually due to foreign employment in the local villages.

Declining Participation in Other Sociocultural Activities

In focus group discussions, participants were queried about their views on how labour migration might be undermining the village's social unity and cohesion. The predominant response was that there is "no one in the village for any social, economic, and cultural activities," highlighting individual perceptions, involvement, and engagement with sociocultural events.

Mr. Ratna, a 68-year-old man, remarked on the difficulty of involving young people, even in attending funerals. He noted that the small gathering at these events clearly illustrates how labour migration is impacting social unity.

A decade ago, funerals typically attracted between 100 to 150 mourners, occasionally exceeding 200 if the deceased was well-regarded in the village. Nowadays, only about 25 to 30 individuals attend funerals, largely due to the reduced number of men remaining in the village. In Hindu tradition, women are culturally prohibited from attending funerals, and elderly individuals find it challenging to transport the deceased to the cremation site.

Mr. Chandra noted that previously when an elderly man passed away in the hospital, it was challenging to gather enough people to transport the body back to the village.

Deusi and *Bhailo* illustrate a decrease in youth engagement in cultural activities. These traditions, typically carried out by young people, are associated with *Tihar*, Nepal's second-largest festival, which occurs in October or November.

Mr. Thapa, 57, mentioned that just a few years ago, at least 10 Deusi groups would visit his home. However, last year, only 2 groups performed, and the number of boys in each was quite small. He noted that many young people from the village have left for jobs overseas, and nowadays, children show less interest in maintaining local traditions.

Mr. Pradhan, 37, who recently returned from Malaysia, mentioned that eight years back, they used money raised from Deusi to install a tube well at a road junction in their village. He noted that, in the past, their village enjoyed a strong sense of cooperation and unity.

FGD participants stated that people used to gather for pre-wedding preparation 2-3 days earlier in the past. They worked together for religious and cultural ceremonies. In the past, such cooperation and togetherness had brought social unity and integrity to the village. Migrant households have more income than non-migrant households and have significant differences in consumption and living patterns (Sijapati et al., 2017). Therefore, nowadays, migrants' households either hire workers for marriage, other religious and cultural ceremonies or prefer to go to party palaces and event venues. Currently,

Prithvinagar has 3 party palaces located in *Sombare*, *Sagarmatha* and *Gyane Chowk*. Of the total events organized in the party palaces, more than 70% belong to migrant households, the owner of the Sombare Party Palace said.

Sansare Pooja was a cultural event that was practiced up until 7-8 years ago. Following the rice harvest, the entire village, including women and children, would head to the nearby forest to participate in *Sansare Pooja*. They engaged in singing, dancing, and enjoying various local dishes, as well as sacrificing goats to honour the forest deity, seeking prosperity for the community. Additionally, villagers would discuss social issues during this time. It was like a communal picnic for everyone in the village (Bhandari, 2010). However, focus group discussions and key informants have confirmed that *Sansare Pooja* has not been organized in Prithvinagar for the past 7-8 years due to the huge out-migration of local youth.

Mr. Gurung, aged 81, noted that the villagers can no longer hold a *Sansare Pooja* annually. The youth have moved overseas, leaving behind their elderly parents and children. The traditions of unity, community, and friendship in the village have been eroded by the trend of working abroad.

Kirtan is a devotional song about the life of God Krishna and other gods/goddesses. It is collectively performed by old people and children in the Hindu community

and society. Prithvinagar is a large village comprising more than 15 other small settlements. Until 7 years before, most of the villages had *Kirtan* groups having 20-25 members in each group. These *Kirtan* groups used to perform their song 2-3 times a month in their villages rotationally. Now, only 3 *Kirtan* groups are left in the Prithvinagar and their performances are rarely organized.

In casual discussions, certain individuals emerged who were unwilling to embrace the idea that social cohesion is slowly deteriorating in Prithvinagar. They presented the example of several small farmers' beneficiary groups of "Local Small Farmers Cooperative Limited". This evidence was discussed with key informants and they informed that despite a large number of farmer groups, many groups are not functioning properly due to poor account keeping, uncleared debt, irregularity of group meetings and members going abroad.

The emergence of new forms of inter-household relationship

Migrant households require more money to pay for foreign employment or for other expenses like repaying debts, health expenses, construction of a new house and organizing marriage and baptism ceremonies. Normally large amounts of money cannot be borrowed from neighbours and most migrant households have poor access to local banks and financial institutions. In such cases, many households move towards informal credit

sources (Sijapati et al., 2017). Today, Prithvinagar has 8 local cooperatives, 12 microfinance institutions, 1 development bank and 1 commercial bank (Key informants' interview, 2023 at Sombare). Local cooperatives and microfinance do not provide enough money for local households so that they can pay for tickets and visas for their family members going for foreign employment. Financial institutions and banks require collateral and enough income to approve loans, which is not easy for local households. In this scenario, numerous households find themselves forced to borrow money from local lenders in *Dhito Pass*¹, facing high interest rates ranging from 24% to 36% annually, or sometimes even higher (Bhandari, 2007).

Under typical circumstances, it usually requires about 12 to 18 months to cover the interest on the entire loan for a migrant who has travelled to GCC nations or Malaysia. The average cost of foreign employment was NPR 1,34,750 with some variation, while the average remittances sent was NPR 159, 511 per year (Sijapati et al., 2017). If the migrant fails to secure the anticipated job or falls ill while abroad, he may be unable to pay the interest. As a result, the moneylender

1 *Dhito Pass* is a formal contract established between the lender and the borrower. Under this agreement, land documents are arranged so that the lender temporarily becomes the landowner. If the borrower fails to pay the interest when due, ownership transfers to the lender, or the lender may legally take possession of the land.

takes possession of his land, leaving the migrant landless in the village. During FGDs, participants informed that many migrants to GCC countries and Malaysia were unable to pay their loans and interest in time and lost their land. Key informants further justified several cases of seized land by the moneylenders in the village. Because of the elevated interest rates, moneylenders are profiting significantly through the *Dhito Pass* system and are becoming landlords in the village.

Mr. Dahal, who is 42 years old, is a migrant who faced difficulties. He travelled to Malaysia five years back but wasn't able to secure a well-paying job, leaving him unable to cover his interest payments. Two years after moving to Malaysia, a moneylender took possession of his land, resulting in him losing his property.

Conversations with local households, along with focus group discussions and interviews with key informants, reveal that the *Dhito Pass* system has led to the emergence of two distinct classes: landlords and landless households in various settlements within the study area (Bhandari, 2010). Over time, affluent individuals are gathering more wealth by charging high interest rates on loans to aspiring migrants, while numerous unsuccessful migrants are losing their land (Bhandari, 2010). Consequently, the rift between neighbours (the moneylender and the debtor) is growing significantly in Prithvinagar. Here, institution-level factors of social cohesion like governance

of formal institutions in society are found as the emergence of new forms of interhousehold relationship.

Conclusion

This study has tried to explore, understand and examine social cohesion through the three different but intertwined levels of social cohesion i.e. individual, community and institution. Different factors associated with these three levels of social cohesion are explored and tried to link with different social-cultural activities and performance as the measuring indicators of social cohesion. People's motivation, perceptions, norms and values have changed over the time at both individual and community levels towards *Parma* culture, *Dhan Nacha*, *Anshabanda*, *Sansare Pooja*, *Kirtan*, *Deusi Bhailo*, divorce, borrowing behaviours and some other socio-cultural activities/performance.

Foreign employment has brought several changes in the social and economic environment, family relationships and ties. As a result, the intensity of *Parma* culture, *Dhan Nach*, *Sansar Pooja*, *Kirtan*, *Deusi Bhailo* are decreasing rapidly year by year due to the low individual participation, poor shared loyalties and mutual moral support, less social bonds and trust, poor friendship networks, poor reciprocal loyalty and solidarity, poor sense of belongings and most importantly increasing socio-economic disparities in both individual and community level due to the massive outflow of local youths.

In the case of the emergence of new forms of interhousehold relationships, poor governance of informal institutions plays a pivotal role as a key institutional-level factor. Likewise, increasing economic inequalities among the local households and poor life satisfaction of local youths also indicate the weakening social cohesion at the institutional level. However, existing social and religious harmony, peace and excitement of local people towards the parliament and local-level election indicates the increasing social solidarity and bonds of local households and communities at the institutional level. Therefore, this study has brought some debates on social cohesion caused by foreign employment. They are: I) How does foreign employment contribute to cultural diversity and whether this diversity enhances or challenges social cohesion? II) How returnees from foreign employment are contributing to community development and whether this positively influences social cohesion and III) How exposure to different cultures through foreign employment influences social norms, values and traditions in the origin area.

To sum up, this study has examined that the absence of a large number of youngsters in the village caused by foreign employment and their remitted money has had a significant impact on social values, norms, unity and integrity. Household split (Anshabanda) is taking place much earlier in migrated

families compared to non-migrant households. Moreover, the trend and volume of foreign employment-induced divorce cases among migrant couples are increasing rapidly. The traditional cultures and practices like *Parma System*, *Dhan Nach*, *Aicho Paicho*, *Kirtan* and *Sansare Pooja* are on the threshold of disappearing. Foreign employment is negatively influencing social cohesion through the emergence of new forms of inter-household relationships in the local communities.

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