

## An Overview of Internal Migration in Nepal

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### Introduction

This paper attempts to give an overview of internal migration in Nepal. It is divided into two sections: The first section deals with the history of internal migration in Nepal. The other part contains the volume and pattern of internal migration in Nepal.

Migration is the movement of the people from one defined area to another during an interval and involving a change of residence. And internal migration is the flow of population moving within the country.

### History of Internal Migration

History of internal migration in Nepal is not new. It has existed since the early days when the migration stream was from east to west. Theoretically, the motivation for the migration (internal and international) is economic or in search of resources. But historical evidences show that in the beginning internal migration in Nepal had political implications. In other words internal migration in Nepal was directly related to politics.

King Mukund Sen was the first victorious hill king to win over eastern Tarai in the 16th Century. He looked upon the dense Tarai forest as a means of defense against invasion from India.<sup>1</sup>

The conquest of Kathmandu Valley by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1756 marked the important chapter in the history of internal migration in Nepal. But the internal migration of Nepalese people during the political unification of Nepal was not due to mere desire, but under compulsion. Conway *et. al.* mentioned:

...large scale campings of territorial expansion mounted by Prithvi Narayan Shah and his subsequent successors required an enormous supply of labour. A large labour force was necessary not only for the army service, but also for many other services...the Gorkhali Government therefore found it expedient to fulfil its labour requirements through the time honoured system of exacting work from its subject on compulsory basis.<sup>2</sup>

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Before Anglo-Nepali War, inner Tarai was opened and internal migration for hill people was encouraged by the then Government. It was not directed towards the improvement of poor economic condition of hill people, but it was "from the strategic point of view"<sup>3</sup>.

It was the official policy of Rana regime (1846-1951) to attract the settlers into Tarai region closest to Indian border not only from hills but also from India, by allotment for the clearance of the forest but not into the inner Tarai.<sup>4</sup> The reason behind settling people close to Indian border was basically from strategic point of view.

During the period of King Rana Bahadur Shah due to severe epidemic of smallpox in Kathmandu Valley, another phase in internal population migration occurred. In this period most children and newly born babies were driven away at "the Tama Koshi River in the East".<sup>5</sup>

Besides the continuous encouragement in the past, the movement of the population was in small scale. However, large scale movement of population from north to south started after the eradication of Malaria in 1956 in Chitwan Valley and its resettlement. The basic "Push" factors were low agricultural productivity and insufficient land holdings in the place of origin. Free distribution of land, easier to clear forest, high fertile soil and low price land in the destination were, among others, the important "Pull" factors leading to transfer of the population from the hills to the Tarai and from ridges to the valley. Rana and Thapa concluded:

...The Chitwan Valley which was then called a death valley (*Kalapani*) was turning point of internal migration in Nepal.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment of 'The Nepal Resettlement Company' (NRC) in 1964, as a designated government agency to execute planned resettlement of landless farmers in various parts of the Tarai also contributed internal population migration in Nepal. Prior to the establishment of NRC, in the Rapti Valley of Chitwan district resettlement was initiated partly as a response to massive floods and land slides in the central hills of Nepal. Provision of health posts, schools, drinking water, postal and transportation facilities and co-operative societies managed by NRC stimulated the pace of internal population migration to Tarai regions.<sup>7</sup>

As discussed above the migration in Nepal is not a new phenomenon and it has existed since the early days. But the main contributing factors that encouraged internal migration recently were the introduction and success of malaria eradication programmes and establishment of Nepal Resettlement Company.

#### **Volume of Pattern of Internal Migration**

The history of census taking in Nepal is rather long. In the period of Bhimsen Thapa censuses were conducted, but these were for limited purpose and were confined to limited areas. Even the scope of four censuses, which were conducted during the Rana period was also limited.<sup>8</sup> In other words, census returns prior to 1952-54 were basically head counts only. So the comparable data on migration come from only by the censuses of 1952/54,

1961, 1971 and 1981, which has been taken on a modified "*de jure basis*".<sup>9</sup>

#### Origin and Destination of Absentee Population 1952/54-1981

In the 1952-54 census, only persons who had been absent from the usual place of residence for six months or more were recorded as migrants. The 1952-54 census indicated that 216,853 persons or 2.6 percent of the enumerated population had been absent from the usual place of residence for six months or more. Ninetyseven percent of such migrants' origin was hills and mountains. Most of (91.36 percent) the people recorded as migrants crossed the international boundary. Rest only 8.64 percent (or 18733 persons) of the total absentees migrated within the different parts of the country. Kathmandu valley had received the highest number of absentee population. It received 7678 persons out of 17733 (or 41.9 percent), 18.7 percent had gone to central Tarai and 7.6 percent had gone to central and western Tarai. The rest had moved to inner Tarai and other parts of the hill. The main reason for the large number of migrants residing in Kathmandu valley was the concentration of facilities such as schools, colleges, offices along with big business and industrial activities.<sup>10</sup>

From the limited data presented above, it appears that Nepal's population was still relatively immobile in the early 1950s. And there was ample unused land in the Tarai. The main reasons among others were "Nepal's hill people were generally unwilling to risk the danger and discomfort of the hot and malaria Tarai".<sup>11</sup>

However, in 1952, the number of people recorded as migrants increased which was 386,824 or 4.0 percent of the counted population. But as was the case in 1952-54, almost all those migrants, origin was abroad. Rest 15.08 percent were migrated to different regions within the country.

The data of absentee population for 1971 were not available, because in 1971 census anyone away from home for six months or more counted in new location of Nepal and family members who were abroad were not counted at all.<sup>12</sup> However, the 1981 census shows that 590,772 persons or 3.93 percent of the enumerated population had been absent from households. Eighty seven percent of such migrants were from hills and mountains. Seventyseven percent of such migrants were male and 81 percent were in productive age group which indicates male and productive population were more migratory than female and unproductive population. sixty-eight percent of population absent from households' destinations was outside the country and of those 95 percent were in India. The reasons for absence were service (53 percent), others/unstated (35 percent), agriculture (5.2 percent), study and training (4 percent) and marital relation (2.7 percent).

Of the 35 percent (or 87,795 persons) who were residing within the country, 66 percent were male and 74 percent were in productive age group which indicates that female and unproductive population were more migratory within the country than outside the country. The reasons for absence within the country were others/unstated (49 percent), service (30 percent), agriculture (10 percent) and rest (11 percent) study/training and marital relation. Out of the total absentee population, living within the country, 30 percent had gone to the central hill

which includes Kathmandu valley, nearly 23 percent to the eastern Tarai, 10 percent to the central Tarai, 8 percent to the eastern hill, 7 percent to the western hill, 15 percent to western, mid-western and far-western Tarai. The rest had moved to the other parts of hills and mountains.

From the data presented above, it appears that migrants living abroad increased from 198,120 persons in 1952-54 to 402,772 in 1981, an increase of 193 percent during the intercensal period 1952/54-1981, and migrants living within the country increased from 18,722 in 1952/54 to 187,795 in 1981, registering an increase of 902 percent during the same period. Thus there had been remarkable increase in the absentee population, which suggests an increase in the magnitude of migration in Nepal.

#### **Volume and Pattern of Life-time Internal Migration**

The 1961, 1971 and 1981 censuses asked 11 the respondents about their place of birth. The place of birth of a person was identified in terms of district where he/she was born. From this information it is possible to measure the volume and pattern of life time migrants. According to census definition "a life-time migrant is one who was enumerated in a district different from his/her place of birth i.e. district."<sup>19</sup> But there are some problems associated with the comparison of migration data. The number of regions for which these data were provided were not the same for all the census years. There were 10 regions for the 1961 and 1971 censuses, while there were 15 in the 1981 census. Moreover, the 1961 and 1981 censuses considered the movement within and across the region, while the 1971 census examined this mobility only across the region. Although, it is possible to compare origin (where someone was born) with destination (where he/she was living at the census time) from the 1971 census information, there are problems with using this information as a measure of migration. Because persons might have made any number of moves after leaving their place of birth and before arriving at their current location, and migrants who previously left their birth place but later returned and were there at census time are lost from this measure of migration.<sup>20</sup> Another problem associated with the migration data was the changes in the district boundaries. As stated above, district was the unit of identification of one's birth place but there had been considerable changes in the boundaries since 1961 and the number of districts also increased from 55 in 1961 to 75 in 1971. This is likely to produce biased while comparing migration data at the regional level.

Despite these limitations, some interesting conclusions can be made from the tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 concerning the volume and pattern of life time internal migration in Nepal.

Table 1 presents data on volume of life time internal migration in Nepal for the census year 1961-1981. The table is restricted to those persons who were born in Nepal only. The 1961 census indicated that 0.42 million or 4.54 percent of the enumerated native population had moved from their area of birth. In 1971, the number of persons who moved from their district of birth was relatively small in percentage only 4.52 percent of the 11.21 million. By 1981, the number of such lifetime internal migrants had increased substantially to 1.27 million or 8.60 percent of the native born population. Of these 0.66 million or 52 percent were females and

rest 0.61 million or 48 percent were males. Details on the sex ratio of life time internal migrants for 1961 and 1972 are not available. These figures suggest that Nepal had a relatively immobile population until 1961, but during 1971-1981 period, there had been a noticeable increase in the internal migration.

Although the unit of enumeration of a lifetime migrant has been a district for all the censuses since 1961 census, the data on life time internal migration were also available by the census at the regional level. (Both geographic and development regions).

Tables 2 and 3 present data on the net internal migration for each geographic region year. i. e. (those who moved across the geographic region for the census) 1971 and 1981. If we compare the tables 2 and 3, the figures show that life time migration has increased substantially i.e. from 0.445 million in 1971 to 0.929 million in 1981, indicating an increase of 109 percent. Among those who moved across the geographic region, the proportion of male is higher than female. Of the 0.929 million internal migrants in 1981, 0.481 million or 52 percent were males and remaining 48 percent were females. If we compare this sex ratio with the sex ratio of table 1, "it appears that the female migrants tend to move more frequently within the region. The finding of higher mobility of females within the region than across the region may be attributed, among others, to the fact that the female migration is mostly due to marriage and this usually takes place within a region among neighbouring districts, while the male migration is mostly due to economic reason (s) which may require a male number of the household to move across the region to look jobs or other economic opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

It may be further observed from the tables 2 and 3 that the majority of migrants originated from hill followed by mountain and Tarai. In 1971, the net losers of population were the hills and mountains regions, i.e. nearly 0.36 million and 0.04 million respectively, while net gainer was the tarai region i.e. 0.40 million. In 1981 also the region that had lost largest number of population to other regions of Nepal was the hill region i.e. 0.42 million, followed by mountain (more than 0.26 million) the region that had gained the greater influx of migrants was Tarai (nearly 0.68 million).

Why was there greater influx of internal migrants to the Tarai region? Both 'Pull' and 'Push' factors have led to the increasing migration streams from the mountains and hills to the Tarai. One of the major factors leading people to be pushed out of the mountains and hills is the unavailability of usable land for cultivation, coupled with population pressure and declining agricultural productivity. In addition, the decreasing role of the trans-Himalayan trade may also have aggravated the economic situation of the mountains and some of the upper hill areas, thus forcing people to move elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> On the 'pull' side major factor for migration to the tarai has been the opening of new agricultural land following malaria control. Last, but not the least, the probable cause was Nepal government policy, which attempted to encourage the "Nepalization"<sup>17</sup> of the Tarai and inner Tarai through internal migration from the hills and mountain, by the establishment of Nepal Resettlement Company in 1964.

Huge influx of people from the hills and mountains to Tarai has accelerated the pace of population growth of the later. Between 1971 and 1981, the population of Tarai increased at the rate of 4.19 percent per annum. Of this growth 0.67 percent is attributed to net internal migration.<sup>18</sup>

Tables 4 and 5 provide a closer look at lifetime internal migration pattern between development regions for the period 1971 and 1981. In 1971, the development region that has lost the largest number of persons to other development regions of Nepal was Western Development region (WDR) (58,133 persons), followed by Mid-Western Development Region (MWDR) (17,210 persons) and Eastern Development Region (EDR) (13,104 persons) respectively. The development regions that had gained the population were Central Development Region (CDR) (70,331 persons) followed by Far Western Development Region (FWDR) (i.e. 18,116 persons). In 1981, EDR was ranked first among the development regions losing population (184,137 persons) followed by WDR (17,908 persons). Among the development regions gaining population, CDR ranked first (126,687 persons), followed by FWDR (55,822 persons) and MWDR (19,516 persons), respectively. Thus while looking at the migration pattern by development regions we find some changes in the rank order of the development regions in terms of losing and gaining population during 1971-1981 period. Data suggest that WDR which was ranked first among the development regions losing population in 1971 has been displaced into second place in 1981 by EDR, whose position was third in losing population in 1971. MWDR which was second among development regions losing population in 1971 has turned into net gainer in 1981, and occupied the third position experiencing the net increase of population in 1981. But no changes in the position of CDR and FWDR were recorded in 1971 and 1981. The net gain of population of CDR due to migration increased from 0.070 million in 1971 to 0.126 million in 1981, indicating an increase of 80 percent during the intercensal period 1971-1981; While the net gain of the FWDR due to migration increased from 0.018 million in 1971 to 0.055 in 1981.

### Conclusion

Migration in Nepal is the product of economic situation of the country. Majority of the migrants leaving their homes were not in a better living standard. During the 1950s and earlier, people from hills and the mountains migrated from Nepal mainly to India to seek jobs. Internal migration did not become an important component of population redistribution until the 1960s. It was only after the introduction and success of malaria eradication programme in 1956, the sparsely inhabited Tarai was opened for settlement. Responding to population pressure in the hills and mountains and to the opportunity of acquiring virgin land, inhabitants of the hills began moving into Tarai for livelihood. Thus the stream of internal migration was characterised by vertical movement, lateral movement was pronounced within the Tarai only.<sup>19</sup> The process of internal migration dampened the volume of emigration 1960 onwards.

Table - 1  
Life-time Internal Migrants of Nepal  
(1961-1981)

Year	Native born population			Life-time migrants			Life-time migrants as a percentage of native born population
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	
1961	9,075,376	4,514,698	4,560,678	422,402	—	—	4.54
1971	11,218,535	5,693,723	5,524,812	506,925	—	—	4.52
1981	14,788,800	7,623,781	7,165,019	1,272,288	610,593	611,695	8.60

Source: CBS, Nepal Population Censuses 1961, 1971, and 1981, Vol. II.

Table - 2  
Life-time Net Migrants for Geographic Region, 1971

Place of Enumeration	Place of Birth			Total	Lifetime net migrants
	Mountain	Hill	Tarai		
Mountain	—	9,258	440	9,698	(—) 39,959
Hill	15,667	—	9,699	25,366	(—) 359,966
Tarai	33,990	376,074	—	410,064	(+) 399,925
Total	49,657	385,332	10,139	445,128	

Source: Same as table 2. (—) indicates net out migrants from the region.  
(+) indicates net in-migrants in the region.

**Table No. 3**  
**Life-time Migrants for Geographic Region, 1971**

Place of enumeration	Place of birth					
	Mountain			Hill		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Mountain	—	—	—	33,423	13,813	19,810
Hill	134,254	67,054	67,200	—	—	—
Tarai	162,832	86,563	76,269	5,61,211	295,267	265,944
All total	297,086	153,617	143,469	594,634	309,080	285,554

Source: Same as table 2.

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Place of birth							Net life time migrants (Total)
Tarai			All Total		Net life time Migrants		
Total	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
2,196	1,119	1,077	14,932	20,687	—138,685	122,782	—261,467
35,669	17,359	18,310	84,413	85,510	—224,667	—200,044	—424,711
—	—	—	381,830	342,213	+365,352	+322,826	+686,178
37,865	18,478	19,387	481,175	448,410			



Table 4  
Life-time Migrants for Development Regions, 1971

place of enumeration	Place of Birth					Net life-time migrants
	EDR	DCR	WDR	MWDR	FWDR	
EDR	-	21,511	1,649	209	195	23,564 (-)
CDR	35,292	-	65,940	1,411	766	103,409 (+)
WDR	735	6,953	-	6,002	191	13,881 (-)
MWDR	271	3,377	3,297	-	1019	7,962 (-)
FWDR	370	1,237	1,128	17,550	-	20,285 (+)
Total	36,668	33,078	72,018	25,172	2169	169,101

Source : CBS, Population Census vol. II Part I, Table 9.

Table-5  
Life-time Migrants for Development Regions, 1981.

Place of enumeration	Place of Birth					Net life time migrants
	EDR	CDR	WDR	MWDR	FWDR	
EDR	-	29,811	4,015	1,456	859	36,141 (-)
CDR	103,102	-	77,848	3,458	1139	185,547 (+)
WDR	54,088	18,753	-	7,329	504	80,674 (-)
MWDR	36,848	5,927	11,025	-	4561	58,361 (+)
FWDR	26,240	4,349	5,694	26,602	-	62,885 (+)
All Total	220,278	58,840	95,582	38,845	7,063	423,608

Source : CDS Population census Vol. II, Part I.

### Foot Notes

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4. Ratna S. Rana and Yadav S. Thapa "Population Migration in Nepal", (Kathmandu: CEDA, August 1974), p. 3.
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6. Rana and Thapa, *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note-4.
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9. 1952/ *Ibid*, p. 1.
10. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 1., p. 58
11. J. Banister and S. Thapa, *The Population Dynamics of Nepal: Papers of the East West Population Institute No. 78 Hawaii, Honolulu, East-West Center, (1981)*, p. 68.
12. *Ibid*, p. 70.
13. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 8, p. 1.
14. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 11, p. 70.
15. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 8, p. 68.
16. *Op. Cit.*, 11, p. 76.
17. Frederick, H. Gaize, *Regional and National Unity in Nepal* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975).
18. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 8, p. 88.
19. *Op. Cit.*, Foot Note 11, p. 87