

# Implications of International Labor Migration from the Perspective of Migrants and Returnees: Symbolic Interactionism Approach

Shraddha Shakya<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*The current debate on migration and development focuses on utilizing social and economic remittances, and adopting a co-development approach to promote development through migration. In Nepal, after the 2015 earthquake, many returnees and migrant households are struggling with poverty and feel compelled to migrate again. Additionally, people often aspire to migrate without being fully prepared for migrant life. This study aims to analyze the impacts of diaspora strategies on the long-term development of international labor migrants, aspiring migrants, returnees, and migrant households. An ethnographic qualitative research study was conducted in Sindhupalchowk district in 2016 to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon from the perspective of actors at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Empirical data was analyzed using the symbolic interactionism approach and narrative analysis, which helped understand how these actors interpret their experiences before and after migration. To discuss the economic aspects of migration, the Neoclassical theory (Borjas) has been applied, while to discuss sociological aspects and transnationality, the Migrant network theory and transnationalism perspective (Fiast, Fauser, Reisenauer) together with Peggy Levitt's concept of social remittances have been applied. The study found that while the State views international labor migration as caused only by economic factors, transnationality has become a key factor at the micro and meso levels, influencing the social, familial, and economic transnational spheres of life of the actors. The study suggests that the State needs to view this phenomenon from a transnational perspective to address the sociological aspects and ensure the long-term development of international labor migrants, returnees, and migrant households.*

**Keywords:** diaspora strategies, international labor migration, social remittances, economic remittances, transnational perspective, symbolic interactionism, migrant network theory

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Shakya is Lecturer at Universal College, Faculty of Management, Tribhuvan University.

## Introduction

Many young men in Nepal work in Kathmandu, the Gulf States, or Malaysia, making it difficult to find male members in households. Nepal is the third largest country in the world in terms of remittances to GDP. Remittances have helped reduce poverty, transform Nepal's economy, and contribute to its macroeconomic stability.

In 2015, an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude hit Nepal, followed by aftershocks including one with a magnitude of 7.3. The earthquake pushed at least 700,000 people into poverty during the fiscal year 2015-2016 and mostly affected 14 districts, including Sindhupalchowk. In Sindhupalchowk, the researcher interviewed Himlal who shared, "...I returned from Qatar ... I had built a house from my salary that I earned in Qatar...but due to the earthquake, it got destroyed... I'm planning to migrate again...". Many people from Sindhupalchowk district migrate to Gulf States and Malaysia. The researcher wants to explore why these countries are preferred over others, and how earthquake-prone regions can ensure development from international labor migration.

Hence, the research's main research question is:

***"In the post-earthquake context of Nepal, how do the migrants, returnees, aspiring migrants, and migrants' households and Government of Nepal perceive international labor migration and its implications at micro level actors' long term development?"***

Three objectives were identified in this research to answer the main question, based on the researcher's preconceptions after reviewing secondary sources. A historical overview of the research project also guided the methodology in fieldwork (Fife 2005: 6-7).

The three interlinked objectives are as follows:

- To study the causes and context of international labor migration from the perspectives of current migrants, returnees, migrant households, aspiring migrants (micro level actors), State, and responsible local bodies
- To assess the strategies developed by the concerned actors (State, local bodies, and micro-level actors) for ensuring development
- To explore the challenges faced by the concerned actors to maximize long-term benefits from this phenomenon.

## Literature Review

Previous studies on international labor migration have mainly focused on economic remittances and how they challenge caste hegemony. Although the livelihood approach has been used to study the effects of international labor migration, more research is needed on how individuals and institutions at different levels perceive it and how diaspora strategies are implemented. The implications of remittances on migrant households and individuals have not been fully explored.

The Neoclassical theory argues that international labor migration is caused by the migrant's decision to earn higher salary (Borjas 1989). This theory will be applied to analyze those perspectives of actors which view international labor migration as caused merely by the economic factor. Transnationalism theory argues that transnationality can affect various spheres of life (Faist, Fauser and Reisenauer 2013). So, transnationality cannot be ignored and so as the role of migrants and migrant families. Transnational scholars argue that development should be seen as a process not as fixed outcome. Most importantly, the skills, knowledge acquired by migrants and returnees before migrating effects on what they remit back to their home country. Social Network theory (Massey 1990) argues that migration is a social process, so the causes of migration may be different than the structural factors that induced migration in the first time (Massey et. al 1987:302). Likewise, the theory argues the aspiring migrants get channeled to particular host countries because they are linked to sending community by highly developed migrant network (Massey et. al 1987:171).

## Research Methodology

The study examines the social interaction between migrants and non-migrants through symbolic interactionism. It explores how individuals interpret “international labor migration phenomenon” based on their social interactions. The qualitative approach aims to understand participants' experiences and the factors influencing the formation of meanings. The chosen case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of international labor migration in Sindhupalchowk district post-earthquake. The research employs various methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, participant observations, and narrative analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The analysis focuses on the implications of diaspora strategies on international labor migrants and the challenges faced at micro, meso, and macro levels.

## Discussion

The Nepalese government has established regulations through the FEA 2007 Act to protect the rights of international migrant workers. They have also collaborated with

international agencies and ratified many ILO conventions, but have not emphasized the utilization of social and economic remittances transferred by international labor migrants and returnees to Nepal, which affects the long-term development of migrant households.

The Foreign Employment Policy 2012 recognized the importance of remittance and specified seven policy pillars. These pillars promote job prospects, develop skilled human resources, simplify migration procedures, ensure good governance, and assist migrant workers in utilizing their remittances. However, the diaspora strategy is still focused on economic aspects only. The major bodies responsible for managing international labor migration in Nepal are MoLE, FEPB, SaMi Project, Sindhupalchok, and Pourakhi Nepal.

### **Contrasting views on international labor migration**

International labor migration has consequences that depend on actors' strategies during the preparation phase. This affects the use of social and economic remittances and poses challenges for the long-term development of micro-level actors. The researcher will discuss GoN's perspectives and how diaspora strategies affected the preparation phase, remittance utilization, and long-term development challenges.

Recruitment agencies often deceive migrants by charging high fees and withholding important information. The government's no-cost policy is a positive step, but many migrants are still unaware of helpful programs like the SaMi project. This lack of information forces migrants to rely on their social network, which often fails to provide complete information, leading to untimely returns or difficult working experiences abroad. The government must disseminate information to aspiring, current, and returning migrants to help them better prepare.

Aspiring migrants do not get enough time to prepare for their new life. Some feel that orientation classes are intimidating, and many do not attend or receive any training. This shows that government strategies are not helping aspiring migrants prepare, which can impact their lives after migrating abroad. Migrant families face obstacles in accessing family literacy training programs due to their busy schedules, limited finances, and illiteracy of women who head the households. This affects the long-term development of international labor migrants and their families. Pre-migration preparation influences the experiences of micro-level actors and is influenced by transnationality formed due to social interaction at the meso and micro level. Migrants may view development as knowledge, skills, mental well-being, or economic satisfaction. Many have invested

their remittance in small businesses and automobiles, but some lost their homes to natural disasters. Long-term development requires combining remittances with entrepreneurial activities. The government lacks concrete strategies for utilizing social and economic remittances acquired by returnees.

Findings show that diaspora strategies focus more on economic aspects which is creating challenges for micro level actors in their long-term development. As the symbolic interactionism approach shows, it was noted that the actors' interaction affects their interpretation of the meaning of the international labor migration phenomenon and its action. From the perspective of GoN, it was noticed that unemployment is considered the major cause of international labor migration which implies the government is viewing this phenomenon considering its economic aspects only. Even if we look at the official term used in Nepal, international labor migration is referred to as "baideshik rojgar" (which means foreign employment in English). However, at the micro level, international labor migration means "bidesh" (which means foreign land in English). Most informants at the micro level did not even understand the official term. From the perspective of current migrants and returnees, it was found that "bidesh janu" (to migrate abroad to a foreign land) have contrasting meaning to them. Some migrants perceived it as a source of freedom, a means for improving social status, and an opportunity to learn about the outside world, whereas some migrants defined it as an "unofficial jail", and migration was an obligation instead of a choice. Likewise, actors at the meso level mentioned that imitation culture is the prime cause of migration. As the individuals' understanding and meaning always depend on their social surrounding, their social interaction and what they note, and how they assess it (Blumer 1969), thus it can be understood why the actors at the micro level and meso level have social interaction with the migrants, returnees and aspiring migrants interpret the causes of this phenomenon differently than the macro level actors who do not have any daily social interactions with the micro level actors. As the symbolic interactionism approach argues, it was found that the meaning of "obligations" and "international labor migration" was interpreted differently depending on the actors (State, returnees, aspiring migrants, current migrants), their experiences, and interaction with each other. From the perspective of officials at the macro level "obligations" referred to the decisions that aspiring migrants make to migrate under the circumstances such as unemployment, low level of education, or due to their unwillingness to study. However, from the perspectives of aspiring migrants, current migrants, and returnees at the micro level, the term "obligations" took various forms throughout their migratory life and continued even after when they returned to their home country.

Aspiring migrants often ignore counselors who advise them on requirements such as training and visa processing time, as they have already received information from recruitment agencies or migrated relatives. Social and economic remittances influence migration decisions, affecting migrants' and their families' lives. Negative implications of this include low prioritization of education and local jobs, which is harmful to long-term development. There are no strategies in place to address these negative impacts at a micro level.

At the meso level, strategies have been developed to reduce the negative impacts of transnationality on people at the micro level. These include promoting safe migration and encouraging a positive attitude towards local jobs. Social remittances have become an important factor in the pre-migration decision-making process, with aspiring migrants often relying on recommendations from friends and relatives who have previously migrated.

Migrants don't only consider wage differences when deciding to move. Social conditions also play a crucial role as per Massey (1990). Most migrants belong to the Gulf States and Malaysia. Painters, electricians, and drivers are the most common jobs among them, based on recommendations from their migrant friends.

Aspiring migrants are often misled by the recruitment agencies (RAs) and agents in the Sindhupalchowk district. The socio-economic conditions of the migrants also play a significant role in their decision to migrate internationally. This is why the majority of migrants from the district end up in Gulf States and Malaysia.

Nepalese migrants struggle to utilize their remittances due to local circumstances such as insufficient resources, unstable political conditions, and lack of infrastructure. Returnees need suggestions and opportunities to channel their remittances into productive sectors. Despite these challenges, migrants contribute to the local development of their district by collectively remitting money. Pourakhi, an organization formed by returnee migrants, works for the welfare of international labor migrants, mainly women, and also collaborates with male migrants in Sindhupalchowk.

Overall, the state failed to meet its goals outlined in its policies. While the government's skilled migrant-sending and no-cost migration policies are commendable, research shows that implementing them requires acknowledging the policies' transnational nature, including both positive and negative implications, and the role of current migrants and returnees as agents of development. The Government of Nepal (GoN) needs to embrace a transnational perspective to effectively utilize social and economic

remittances. The research, adopting symbolic interactionism, reveals that actors' strategies impact the long-term development of international labor migrants and returnees in Sindhupalchowk. The findings suggest that the state should address social issues associated with international labor migration in its diaspora strategies for long-term development.

## **Conclusion and its implications**

The government has set up Information Offices to assist aspiring migrants, but research shows that these individuals heavily rely on their social networks to make migration decisions. This includes choosing when and how to migrate, which recruitment agencies to contact, and even which jobs and countries to consider. However, the prevalence of strong social networks often limits the information that aspiring migrants receive and limits their options for destinations. In areas like Sindhupalchowk district, where social networks are primarily focused on the Gulf States or Malaysia, migrants tend to choose the same countries and jobs (such as drivers, painters, electricians, factory workers, and waiters) due to limited exposure to other options.

Additionally, the education level of migrants and their local constraints often make it difficult for them to consider other destinations without the help of their social networks. The policies put in place by the government have not effectively reached these targeted individuals. To address these issues, a transnational perspective is required, and the government should work with returnees and current migrants to ensure long-term development for all. Collaboration with these individuals is also crucial when designing programs targeting international labor migrants. Finally, it is important to educate aspiring migrants, migrant households, returnees, and current migrants on how to utilize their knowledge, skills, and experiences to create long-term benefits for themselves and their communities.

## **Limitation of the study and scope for future research**

Returnees and aspiring migrants in Sindhupalchowk district face important issues related to education, skill utilization, and women empowerment. Providing education opportunities to returnees can help them make informed decisions. Similarly, informing migrants about utilizing their skills and financial capital in Nepal can be helpful. Empowering women with knowledge, education, and resources is crucial for their participation in family literacy training, and future research can be conducted on the importance of empowering women and migrant groups for financial literacy management.



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