



Across the Border: Push-Pull Dynamics and the Lived Experiences of Nepalese Labour Migrants in India

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Abstract

This study explores the enduring yet under-researched phenomenon of labour migration from Nepal's Sudurpashchim Province to India, shaped by poverty, underdevelopment, and an open border. Despite its large scale, this migration remains informal and largely undocumented, receiving limited attention in academic and policy arenas. To address this research gap, the study explores the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of the migration process through qualitative methods. These include narrative inquiry, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, participant observation and case studies. The fieldwork is conducted at the primary border checkpoints of Sudurpashchim Province, specifically at Gaddachowki in Kanchanpur district and Gourifanta in Kailali district. The findings highlight a predominance of male migrants especially from marginalized caste groups, driven by chronic poverty, unemployment, environmental challenges and lack of opportunities at home. Remittances are primarily used to meet basic household needs rather than for long-term development. Due to its informal and undocumented nature, this migration provides immediate financial relief but fails to bring about significant socio-economic transformation. Moreover, limited financial literacy and the absence of institutional support further constrain the potential benefits. The study concludes that labour migration from Sudurpashchim is largely a survival strategy rooted in structural inequalities. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive policy reforms, including bilateral labour, agreements between Nepal and India, social security measures, rural development initiatives, legal awareness campaigns and community-level support systems. Such interventions are crucial to ensure safer, more dignified and informed migration experiences for Nepalese workers.

Keywords: Labour migration, open border, social network, working conditions

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Introduction

Labour migration has long been a defining feature of Nepal–India relations, particularly among the populations of Nepal’s western hill regions. Among them, Sudurpashchim Province stands out as one of the most migration-prone areas, with an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 individuals seeking employment in India. Cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Punjab, Nainital, Gujrat and Bangalore are popular destinations for these migrants, who engage in a wide range of occupations including security services, construction, agriculture, hospitality, domestic work, and transport. While resource-rich individuals from the region may opt for Gulf countries, economically disadvantaged groups—especially those from remote hill districts—often migrate to India as a livelihood strategy (Bhatt, 2023a).

The open-border policy between Nepal and India, formalized by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, has facilitated this movement by allowing Nepali citizens to live and work in India without visas or work permits (Sijapati & Limbu, 2012). However, this long-standing arrangement has also led to informality and invisibility in migrant employment, leaving most Nepali labourers without legal protection, social security, or access to basic services.

The employment landscape for Nepali migrants in India is shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, education, and access to social networks. Many are employed as security guards in metropolitan areas, a role where Nepalese are often preferred for their perceived discipline and loyalty. Others work in construction, agriculture, hospitality, and domestic service, often under harsh, exploitative, and unregulated conditions (Adhikari & Gurung, 2020; Gartaula, 2009; Thieme, 2006). Migrant women, in particular, face heightened vulnerabilities, especially in domestic work, where they frequently experience wage theft, long working hours, and even physical or sexual abuse (Sijapati & Limbu, 2012).

Despite the critical economic contributions these migrants make through remittances, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding their exact numbers, occupational distribution, earnings, and challenges in destination areas. Estimates suggest that 1.5 to 3 million Nepalese are working in India at any given time (NIDS, 2020), with 1,000 to 1,200 crossing the border daily in search of work. Much of this movement is circular and seasonal, with migrants returning home during festivals such as Dashain and Tihar, or during agricultural seasons (Ghimire, 2014).

Nepali migrants in India are typically employed in the informal sector, lacking employment contracts and excluded from Indian labour laws and welfare schemes. They are frequently subject to wage discrimination, occupational hazards, and social exclusion, with limited recourse to grievance mechanisms (Sharma, 2019; Kharel, 2016). The socio-psychological effects of migration are equally significant,

as prolonged absences often disrupt family structures, increase emotional stress, and reshape traditional gender roles (Gartaula, 2009).

Moreover, Bhatt (2023c) observes that labour migration from Sudurpashchim often follows generational and staged patterns—first moving to the Terai, then onward to India—frequently influenced by existing social networks in major Indian cities. Unlike Indian migrants who tend to migrate for economic reasons to nearby areas, Nepali migrants' destinations are often socially and culturally determined. Despite its importance, this cross-border labour migration continues to operate without formal bilateral agreements or effective regulatory frameworks. As a result, Nepali migrants remain invisible in both Indian labour policies and Nepal's migrant protection initiatives.

Nepali labour migration to India has long served as a crucial livelihood strategy for people from the country's far western regions, particularly from Sudurpashchim Province. This region, historically marked by limited economic opportunities, underdeveloped infrastructure, and weak state presence, has seen generations of its population engage in seasonal or long-term labour migration across the open border to India. Despite the prevalence and historical continuity of this migratory trend, scholarly attention to this phenomenon remains surprisingly sparse, especially in the context of Sudurpashchim Province. Most existing literature on Nepali migration tends to focus on migration to the Gulf countries and Malaysia, overlooking the nuanced experiences of those who migrate to India—often through informal routes and with little to no documentation. The lack of systematic, field-based research from this particular province has led to a significant gap in understanding how migrants navigate the socio-economic and psychological challenges associated with cross-border mobility. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the ground realities of labour migration to India through qualitative inquiry in Sudurpashchim Province. The central research question guiding this study is: “What is the current scenario of Nepalese labour migration to India, and how do various social, economic, and psychological dimensions shape this process?” By grounding this investigation in field-level evidence and narrative accounts, the research aims to generate new insights into the everyday experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of migrants and their families, while contributing to a more inclusive and regionally grounded understanding of Nepal-India labour migration.

This research aims to offer a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of Nepali migrants across diverse occupations and cities in India. The findings are expected to contribute to evidence-based policymaking, guiding both the Government of Nepal and relevant non-governmental stakeholders in developing targeted bilateral agreements, migration governance policies, and support mechanisms that ensure the safety, dignity, and economic security of Nepali migrant workers.

Methods and Procedures

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, motivations, and challenges faced by labour migrants from Sudurpaschim Province of Nepal who travel to India for work. Given the complex and subjective nature of migration, a qualitative approach was best suited to uncover the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions of this phenomenon. Drawing on narrative inquiry and thematic exploration, the study employed grounded theory methods to allow patterns and insights to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

Selection of Study Locations: Rationale and Context

Fieldwork was carried out in two districts of Sudurpaschim Province—Kanchanpur and Kailali—which were purposively selected due to their high rates of out-migration and close proximity to the Indian border. These districts host two major border crossings—Gaddachowki in Kanchanpur and Gourifanta in Kailali—through which large numbers of migrants from both the plains and nearby hilly regions regularly travel to India. The selection of these sites allowed for a comparative analysis of migration dynamics across varied geographic and socio-economic settings. Special emphasis was placed on key transit hubs, particularly the Gaddachowki border point, which serves as a critical gateway for cross-border mobility.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, experience-based insights into the processes and consequences of labour migration. The sample encompassed a diverse range of stakeholders, including outgoing and returnee migrants (interviewed while crossing the border into Nepal), local government officials, and representatives from NGOs working on labour and migration issues. This multi-perspective approach allowed for the inclusion of both direct and indirect experiences of migration. In total, the study conducted ten in-depth interviews with migrants and five key informant interviews with relevant local stakeholders.

Data Collection Tools

Multiple qualitative tools were employed to collect rich and context-specific data for this study. In-depth interviews (IDIs) served as the primary method, capturing personal migration trajectories, working and living conditions in India, remittance practices, and the challenges migrants face upon return and reintegration. Complementing this, key informant interviews (KIIs) with local government officials, border personnel, and civil society actors provided valuable perspectives on policy gaps, existing support mechanisms, and community perceptions of migration. Participant observation at border checkpoints, migrant-sending communities, and public gatherings enabled the researcher to contextualize and validate interview findings through direct engagement with the migration environment. Additionally, detailed case studies based on the life histories of selected migrants offered deeper insights into how migration experiences are shaped by identity, family structures, and socio-economic circumstances.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and translated from local languages such as Doteli, Bajhangi, and Nepali into English where necessary. The data were manually coded using open and axial coding techniques, allowing recurring themes and subthemes to emerge. These were organized into key analytical categories, including migration decision-making processes, push-pull factors, employment conditions, remittance use, experiences of exploitation, border-crossing narratives, and reintegration challenges. The thematic organization of data helped to construct a grounded understanding of the cross-border migration phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations provided regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of respondents, and all personal details were kept confidential. Given the sensitivity of topics such as undocumented migration and exploitation, the researcher exercised caution and cultural sensitivity during data collection, particularly when discussing personal or traumatic experiences. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by Far Western University.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Labour Migrants

A study on Indo-Nepal migration conducted by Bhatt (2024) revealed that labour migration from Sudurpaschim Province to India is predominantly male-dominated. Approximately 87% of the migrants were identified as men, most of whom fall within the 18 to 40 age group. These male migrants commonly travel to various Indian cities in pursuit of employment opportunities. In contrast, the participation of women in cross-border migration remains limited. When women do migrate, they are often accompanied by their husbands or close relatives. Their reasons for migration typically include visiting family, caregiving for children or spouses, engaging in domestic work, or seeking medical treatment.

This gendered migration pattern is largely influenced by the deeply rooted social and cultural norms of the Sudurpaschim region, where women are generally discouraged from traveling alone or making independent migration decisions without family consultation or approval. Due to these constraints, it is rare for married women to migrate to India alone for work or other purposes. However, some unmarried women do choose to migrate to third countries for education or employment opportunities, though this, too, is more common than similar migration to India.

A small number of single women do migrate to India for work, but even they typically travel with close family members. In some cases, women who had previously migrated with their husbands return home following the death of their spouse, only to later resume migration when accompanied by supportive relatives (case found in personal communication). This is often met with criticism or social stigma from conservative neighbours and extended family, reflecting the socio-cultural backwardness that still exists in parts of the region.

One illustrative case involves a widowed woman, age of 42 years who shared her emotional and challenging journey. Two years ago, her husband, who was employed in a reputable private company in Delhi, tragically died in a road accident. At that time, the family, including their children who were studying at the secondary school level in Delhi, returned to their hometown in Sudurpaschim due to societal pressure and cultural expectations. However, the children's uncle—also employed in Delhi—later took them back with him so they could continue their education. After about a year, their mother also returned to Delhi. The same private company where her husband had worked offered her an assistant-level job. She now lives there with her children, feels secure, and expresses a sense of happiness. The company even provided them with a small accommodation facility.

This case is just one among many. Numerous families from the region remain dependent on the Indian job market due to limited employment opportunities within Nepal, especially in the rural and economically marginalized areas of Sudurpaschim. Many migrants emphasize that Nepal has not yet reached a position where it can ensure job opportunities for all, particularly in remote regions. As a result, cross-border migration to India continues, following a pattern that dates back to the time of their forefathers.

The majority of migrants belonged to marginalized caste and ethnic groups such as Dalits and Janajatis. Migration is often a household-level strategy to cope with chronic poverty, lack of local employment, and poor access to public services.

Push and Pull Factors of Migration from Nepal to India: Insights from Field Research

Based on field observations and key informant interviews conducted across the border of Sudurpaschim Province, it is evident that a complex interplay of push and pull factors continues to drive cross-border migration to India. These factors are rooted in both structural deficiencies within Nepal and perceived opportunities across the border.

Push Factors: Economic and Environmental Insecurity in Rural Nepal

One of the most prominent push factors is chronic unemployment and underemployment, particularly among the working-age population in the hilly regions of Sudurpaschim. During field visits across the border, several returnees' migrants, emphasized the severe lack of economic opportunities beyond seasonal farming and subsistence-level activities. A 24-year-old male respondent from Chainpur (Bajhang) at Gaddachowki border remarked during an interview, "We wake up every morning hoping for work, but apart from tilling small patches of land, there's nothing to do. Migration becomes the only choice."

Limited agricultural productivity further compounds this problem. Steep, fragmented land, inadequate irrigation facilities, and reliance on traditional farming methods have made agriculture an unviable livelihood option for many families. One returnee woman of Bajhang (Interview) shared that due to male outmigration, women and elderly are left to manage small farms which barely produce enough for household consumption, let alone surplus for the market.

Another critical push factor is the frequent occurrence of natural disasters, including floods and landslides, which disrupt lives and destroy the already fragile infrastructure. In one village in Darchula, respondent (One female returnee) shared how a massive landslide in 2022 washed away entire fields, forcing at least 15 households

to migrate to India. She narrated, “We were already poor, but the landslide took what little we had. My two sons had no choice but to leave for Pithoragarh (India) the very next month.”

Moreover, political instability and lack of infrastructural development were consistently cited by key informants, including local government representatives. Several rural municipalities and even some of municipalities still lack all-weather roads, quality schools, or accessible health centers. Young people feel disconnected and disillusioned with the promises of development. Mayor of Budinanda municipality Bajura (interview on side-line meeting at a programme) put it during a KII, “Development talks happen during elections, but nothing reaches these hills. That’s why our youth disappear to India every season.”

Pull Factors: Opportunities and Social Networks in India

On the other side, various pull factors in India make it an attractive destination for these migrants. The open border and ease of access serve as significant enablers. Migrants do not require a visa or passport, making India the most accessible destination. During my field visit to the Gaddachowki border point in Kanchanpur, it was observed that hundreds of Nepalese, mostly men, were crossing the border daily without any formal checks. One returnee from Delhi mentioned, “India is like an extension of home for us. We donot feel like foreigners there.”

Furthermore, pre-established kinship and community networks in Indian cities play a crucial role in facilitating migration. These networks provide shelter, guidance, and access to employment for new migrants. A 35-year-old migrant going to India from Doti shared at border, “My elder brother has been working in a hotel in Delhi for six years. He called me there when I couldn’t find any job here. Now, I work in the same hotel.” Such social capital reduces the risks and costs associated with migration, especially for first-time migrants.

India also offers a variety of low-skilled job opportunities, particularly in urban centers such as Delhi, Mumbai, Gujrat, Panjab, Haryana, Ludhiana, and Surat. Nepali migrants are commonly employed in construction, hotel and restaurant services, security services, and informal sectors like domestic work. Observations in Mahendranagar and Dhangadi revealed numerous travel agents and middlemen who informally connect job seekers with employers across the border, especially in the hospitality (hotels in Goa and other attractive destinations) and building sectors. A group of young returnees reported that while the pay in India is modest, it is still better than remaining unemployed in their villages.

Migration Routes and Destinations: A Closer Look at Gaddachowki Border Dynamics

Migration from the remote hilly districts of Sudurpashchim Province—namely Bajhang, Bajura, Doti, Achham, and Dadeldhura—follows a well-trodden path toward India, primarily through the Gaddachowki and Gourifanta border points in Kanchanpur district. These border posts serve as vital transit points for thousands of seasonal and long-term migrants seeking better livelihood opportunities across the border.

Case Observations and Interviews at Gaddachowki Border

During a field visit to the Gaddachowki border post, several firsthand accounts and purposive interviews revealed the complex but familiar migration patterns. At dawn, groups of young men, mostly aged between 18 and 40, were seen waiting for buses and jeeps that connect to Banbasa (India), with onward links to Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat, and Himachal Pradesh. Many carried only a small backpack, indicating short-term migration, often seasonal in nature.

One of the interviewees, Ramesh Buda (27) from Doti, shared, “I go to Himachal Pradesh every year after the rice harvest. I work in apple orchards from October to February. A cousin of mine, who has been working there for six years, helps arrange the job and accommodation.”

Similarly, Sita Bohora from Bajhang, traveling with her husband and a child, mentioned, “My husband works in Surat in a garment factory. During the Dashain and Tihar holidays, we return to our village. After the festivals, he goes back to India, sometimes I go too when there are job opportunities for women.”

Migration Networks and Informal Brokers

Local brokers and middlemen, often former migrants themselves, play a significant role in facilitating transportation, job placements, and even legal formalities. Although most cross-border migration through Gaddachowki is informal—given the open border provision between Nepal and India—migrants often rely on these informal agents for logistics and contacts at the destination. These brokers charge varying fees depending on the distance and nature of the job, sometimes leading to exploitative arrangements, especially for first-time or uneducated migrants.

An observation from the border police office revealed that during peak migration seasons—particularly the post-harvest months of October and March—daily foot traffic can exceed 1,000 people, most of them temporary labour migrants.

Festivals and Return Migration

Migration is not a one-way process. Many migrants follow cyclical patterns, returning home during major Nepalese festivals. The Dashain and Tihar festivals, the

New Year celebration (*Bishu Parb*), and *Maghi*, especially celebrated by the Tharu community, act as pull factors drawing migrants back to their villages. These returns often carry economic and emotional significance—migrants bring home money, clothes, and consumer goods, while also participating in important cultural and familial rituals.

Chandra Singh Rawal, of Bouniya Kailali, a returnee from Punjab said, “We always try to return for Dashain. It’s the only time when the whole family gets together. We save money for the journey and gifts. After Tihar, we plan to go back with some of our neighbours.”

Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Labour migration from Nepal to India is a long-established phenomenon shaped by historical, geographical, economic, and social factors. The open border policy between the two nations, reinforced by the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, has facilitated the unrestricted movement of Nepali workers seeking employment in various Indian cities (Gurung, 2016). This migration is primarily driven by economic disparities, poverty, and limited employment opportunities in Nepal, particularly in Sudurpashchim Province, where India offers better income prospects (KC, 2018; Bhatt, 2022). However, despite these economic opportunities, Nepali migrants often face significant challenges, including economic exploitation, poor working conditions, and social discrimination in India (Sijapati & Limbu, 2017).

Field observations at the Gaddachowki border point further revealed significant infrastructural and systemic gaps. Migrants often wait for long hours without access to basic facilities such as clean drinking water, shaded waiting areas, or restrooms. There is also a notable absence of informational or awareness programs that could educate them about their rights and risks associated with migration. Furthermore, the documentation systems at the border remain weak, offering little institutional support or data tracking for safe migration.

Ram Bahadur, a 28-year-old returnee migrant from Bajura district, shared his experience of crossing the border through Gourifanta. Upon reaching the Indian side, he and several others were stopped by Indian security personnel, who accused them of illegal entry despite possessing valid Nepalese citizenship documents. Ram reported being detained for several hours and verbally abused before being let go, warning him not to return without “extra payment” the next time. Such incidents create a climate of fear and uncertainty, especially for first-time migrants unfamiliar with cross-border protocols.

Similarly, it is observed another case of ‘transport exploitation’ at Banbasa-Gaddachowki routes while crossing the India -Nepal border. Hira Devi, a returnee migrant from Baitadi, narrated her suffering involving a tempo (three-wheeler

vehicle) operator at the Indian side of the border. After promising a ride to Banbasa for INR 100, the driver took her midway and then demanded an additional INR 200, threatening to show Indian police who may check her mobile as well as her baggage. He took extra money from her in the name of border security. Temo operator threatened her to get arrested in case she doesn't pay extra money. It was the time of late evening while she was coming comes alone with him. This reflects the broader issue of transportation-related exploitation that many migrants—especially women—face due to limited regulation and oversight.

These cases underscore the urgent need for improved border infrastructure, migrant support centers, legal aid services, and bilateral cooperation to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of cross-border labour migrants. Strengthening documentation, setting up grievance redressal mechanisms, and launching awareness campaigns at major transit points like Gaddachowki could significantly reduce these vulnerabilities.

Employment and Working Conditions in India

The literature collectively illustrates that Nepali migrants in India are concentrated in low-skilled, labor-intensive sectors such as security services, construction, agriculture, hospitality, transport, and domestic work—occupations often shaped by their socio-economic background, skill levels, and access to social networks (Adhikari & Gurung, 2020; Gartaula, 2009; Kharel, 2016; Sharma & Tamang, 2013; Thieme, 2006). While these jobs provide critical income for migrants escaping poverty and unemployment, they are largely informal, poorly regulated, and characterized by exploitative working conditions. Studies highlight long hours with low wages, lack of legal contracts, unsafe work environments, and widespread social discrimination (Adhikari & Gurung, 2020; Sharma, 2019; Thieme, 2006). This micro-level analysis of job nature and workplace vulnerabilities contrasts with Bhatt (2023b), who adopts a structural lens to emphasize the macro-level enablers of migration, such as open borders, geographic proximity, low travel costs, and shared language and climate. While Bhatt explains why migration occurs so easily and frequently, other scholars focus on the hardships migrants face after securing work. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive picture—migration is driven by economic necessity and facilitated by ease of movement, but the destination work environments often fail to protect migrants' rights and well-being.

Insights gathered through discussions with key informants, as well as in-depth interviews with migrants and their families, reveal that while a small segment of Nepali migrants from Sudurpaschim Province manage to obtain relatively stable low-skilled employment in Indian urban centers such as Delhi, Gujarat, and Punjab,

these opportunities are largely confined to sectors like hospitality, manufacturing, construction, and domestic work. A few migrants are employed in hotels, factories, construction sites, or as live-in domestic helpers. However, the majority are engaged in daily wage labour under highly insecure and informal conditions. Most of these jobs are unregulated, lacking written contracts, job security, or access to social protection mechanisms. Migrants and their family members frequently expressed concerns about the absence of legal safeguards, which leaves them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation—such as underpayment, wage theft, hazardous working environments, and sudden termination without notice. This widespread informality in employment not only compromises their economic stability but also deepens their social and psychological vulnerabilities while living and working in a foreign land.

Observation at the Gaddachauki Border (March 2025)

As migrants crossed back into Nepal, many were carrying only small bags, wearing dusty clothes, and showing signs of weakness. Several men, returning from Gujarat and Haryana, reported having worked 10 to 12 hours a day for wages between INR 300 to 500, depending on the nature of work and location. One young returnee, aged about 22, said:

I worked at a brick kiln in Punjab for almost 8 months. We had no fixed work hours. If we fell sick, there was no one to cover for us or provide medical help. My employer even deducted two days' wage when I was hospitalized with a fever.

Key Informant Interview (KII) with a Border Security Officer at Gaddachauki:

Most of these young men are seasonal migrants. Many travels without proper documentation or contracts, so they don't get any social security or insurance. We've even encountered cases of physical abuse and wage theft, but they rarely file formal complaints. (KII, Border Security Officer)

Language barriers further compounded these challenges. Many Nepali migrants, especially from remote villages in Bajhang, Bajura, Doti, or Achham, were unable to communicate fluently in Hindi, which led to discrimination, particularly in urban areas. A middle-aged woman returning from Delhi who had worked as a domestic worker narrated:

My madam always scolded me. I couldn't speak proper Hindi. Even when I did my work properly, she never said thank you. I often felt like an outsider.

In extreme cases, regional and racial discrimination was reported. Migrants recounted being called "Nepali" in derogatory tones, and some reported being underpaid or assigned the dirtiest jobs simply because of their origin.

Remittances and Household Economy

Migrants' earnings vary based on job type and location. Security guards earn INR 10,000–15,000 per month, while construction and agricultural workers make around INR 8,000–12,000 (NIDS, 2020). A significant portion of earnings is remitted back home, supporting household expenses, education, and agricultural investments (Ghimire, 2014). However, unreliable remittance channels and financial literacy gaps often limit effective money management (Sijapati & Limbu, 2012).

Despite the risky working conditions faced by Nepali migrants in India, remittances remain the backbone of household economies in Sudurpaschim Province. For many families, especially in rural and hilly districts with limited local employment opportunities, these earnings are essential for day-to-day survival. Remittances are primarily used for immediate consumption needs—such as food, children's education, loan repayment, and medical expenses. As one returnee (Shiv ji) interviewed at Gaddachauki in March 2025 explained:

I send around 8,000 rupees per month home from my job in Gujarat. My family uses it for groceries, school fees for my two sons, and to pay back the loan we took during COVID.

However, the seasonal and cyclical nature of migration—where many migrants return home during Dashain-Tihar and go back to India afterward in search of work—makes remittance flows irregular and unpredictable. This inconsistency limits families' ability to plan for the long term or invest in productive assets. A key informant interview with a local cooperative member (Ms. Chandani Pant) in Kanchanpur District underscored this constraint:

People do use remittances to pay back debts or fix houses, but very few actually invest in land, business, or education beyond secondary level. They don't earn enough or regularly enough to think beyond the present.

Field observations in a village near Dhangadhi further revealed that while many households had upgraded to tin-roofed homes or purchased small livestock such as goats or chickens, few had stable income sources or savings apart from migration. Financial illiteracy and the lack of rural investment opportunities further restricted the transformative use of remittances. As one woman belongs to migrants' family frankly noted:

My husband has been going to India for 10 years now. He brings money, and we live off it. But we haven't been able to buy land or start a business. If he gets sick or injured, we are finished.

These lived experiences highlight the dual nature of labour migration: while it offers a vital economic lifeline, it also exposes migrants and their families to chronic insecurity, exploitation, and vulnerability—both abroad and at home. Addressing these

issues demands coordinated efforts at both policy and grassroots levels, including safer migration channels, legal protections, financial education, and alternative livelihood opportunities within Nepal.

The situation in Sudurpaschim Province reflects a broader pattern across South Asia, where cross-border remittances from India—though crucial—tend to support subsistence rather than upward mobility. This echoes the findings of Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung (2002), who argued that the volume and irregularity of remittances from India typically preclude long-term investments, unlike more substantial and consistent inflows from Gulf countries. For instance, the returnee who sends NPR 8,000 monthly reflects what Kollmair et al. (2006) observed: that small and sporadic remittances are usually consumed on recurring expenses like food, education, or loan repayments.

In contrast, remittances from Gulf nations—often higher and more regular—have been linked to the purchase of land, house construction, and investment in higher education (Shrestha, 2017). This disparity illustrates how the nature of destination and job type directly influences the use and impact of remittances. Migration to India, being largely informal and low-paid, rarely generates the kind of capital required for transformative change.

Moreover, the absence of institutional support structures in remote districts like Baitadi and Darchula—such as financial services, cooperatives, or entrepreneurship training—reinforces the limited development impact of Indian remittances. This aligns with Thieme and Wyss (2005), who emphasized that structural constraints in rural Nepal hinder productive remittance use. Even minor improvements, such as tin roofs or small livestock ownership, mirror Deshingkar et al.'s (2006) observation that remittances from India “help households cope, but not climb.”

Nonetheless, more recent research by Maharjan et al. (2012) highlights that remittances can contribute to poverty reduction—if complemented by targeted institutional support. In Sudurpaschim, the lack of such enabling structures limits the potential of remittances to serve as a pathway out of poverty. Without addressing the broader systemic challenges, cross-border labour migration remains a survival strategy rather than a vehicle for long-term development.

Conclusion

This study concludes that labour migration from Nepal's Sudurpaschim Province to India is a complex and deeply rooted phenomenon, driven not solely by economic factors but by a combination of historical practices, structural inequalities, social obligations, and systemic development gaps. Migration emerges as a survival strategy for many, particularly in the context of chronic unemployment, low agricultural productivity, recurring natural disasters, and poor infrastructure. While

India's open border, linguistic familiarity, and dense social networks offer accessible avenues for employment, they do not ensure dignity, safety, or long-term well-being for migrants. Field data gathered through border observations, migrant's household interviews, and key informant interactions affirm the broader literature, highlighting how migration reshapes socio-economic structures and migration pattern at the region. The Gaddachowki and Gourifanta borders exemplified the everyday realities of these mobile populations—marked by exploitation, resilience, and hope. To address these challenges, there is a clear need for a multi-pronged approach: cross-border labour agreements between Nepal and India; community-based psychosocial and reintegration support; and awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and promote informed migration decisions. Ultimately, enhancing local development opportunities in Sudurpaschim and fostering regional cooperation will be crucial to ensure that migration is a choice—not a compulsion—for future generations.

The research faced certain limitations. Due to the informal and often undocumented nature of migration to India, some participants were reluctant to disclose full details of their experiences, especially those involving exploitation or legal complications. Additionally, the study was limited to data collection in the origin districts within Nepal and did not include fieldwork in Indian destination areas. As a result, it was not possible to cross-verify certain claims or observe conditions in the actual workplaces of the migrants.

To promote safer and more dignified labour migration for Nepalese workers to India, a comprehensive policy approach is essential. Central to this is the formulation of a Nepal-India bilateral social security agreement that ensures legal recognition of Nepalese workers' rights, including access to healthcare, insurance, pensions, and legal recourse. In parallel, the establishment of a government-managed Social Security Fund would provide critical support for migrants, covering emergency needs, health services, and reintegration efforts upon return. Strengthening awareness and capacity-building initiatives is also key. Community-level training on labour rights, safety measures, and legal provisions should be integrated into pre-departure orientations to better equip migrants and reduce their vulnerability. Simultaneously, diplomatic engagement with Indian counterparts must be enhanced to address migrant protection, improve border management, and ensure swift resolution of grievances through institutionalised mechanisms like bilateral dialogues and welfare committees.

Domestically, boosting economic opportunities through rural development, skill enhancement, and job creation—especially in high-outmigration areas like Sudurpaschim—can reduce the need for forced economic migration. Additionally, increasing public awareness of Indo-Nepal labour migration frameworks via information campaigns and community involvement will foster safer and more informed migration decisions. Together, these strategies present a multi-tiered solution to protect migrant workers and ensure more secure and sustainable migration outcomes.

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