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*Erasmus*

**“We are no longer dependent on them”  
: The Sociocultural effects of labour migration on caste  
relations in rural Nepal**

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## **Glossary**

*Janajatis* – ethnic groups in Nepal

*Jat* – caste and ethnic label

*Bhahira jane* – go “outside (abroad)”

*Jhaga kine* – buy land

*Mandir* – A Hindu temple

*Gumba* – A Buddhist temple

*Dashain* – The biggest festival in Nepal, celebrated by Nepalese of all caste and ethnic groups, usually in late September and early October

*Tarai* – lowlands regions of Nepal

*Parbatiya* – caste-origin Hindu group, from the hill, whose mother tongue is Nepali and is comprised of high and low caste.



## **1. Introduction**

The number of Nepalese labour migrants, mostly working in low-skilled job, has been increasing drastically every year in the country and more than half go to the Gulf countries and Malaysia. With 1,600 people leaving the country for foreign work daily, international migration has, indeed, become a part of the lives of many Nepalis. Not to mention that nearly 30% of national total GDP comes from remittance (Sijapati et al. 2015), international migration has brought out economic changes to the country.

It is important to clarify the definition of low-skilled job, in which 74 per cent of migrant workers were involved according to 2013/14 national statistics, in order to avoid confusion and focus on the main points of this paper. In the national statistics, it is noted that low-skilled jobs are, which require neither good education nor skill levels, concentrated in construction, agriculture, manufacturing and domestic services. (*ibid.*: 29) Moreover, it is high related that low-skill employment and the destination countries, such as Gulf countries and Malaysia.

The current outflux of Nepali labour migrants into the labour receiving countries such as Gulf countries and Malaysia can be explained by the advancement of transportation and communication system, however, the current state of world or national economic and social system plays a significant part. The families of migration aspirants also choose to send one or more of their family members, mostly male, overseas to maximize their human resources for better livelihoods. In this way, it is no surprising that there is a strong relationship between income level and likelihood of migration, though it is not always linear.

As explained above, migration has been approached in two different ways – macro and micro level perspectives. The former shows the

viewpoint of government migration policies or market forces that shape migration patterns and motives. The micro-level perspective cares to emphasize individual and/or household strategies and experiences.

My studies on the labour migration of Nepali people in Central region focus on individuals' lived experiences and their changed social relations, induced by labour migration. In other words, it seeks to understand how labour migration has brought/is bringing changing social relations into their households and community. A number of existing studies on sociocultural effects of labour migration suggest that labour migrants observe and learn different sets of values or practices while working abroad and this, in turn, bring changes in their social practices such as gender perceptions and sociopolitical relations and representations in home society. In addition, these changes do not only happen to migrants but also with the families of migrants who are left home – which are my main study scope.

Apart from the increasing migration trend that describes today's Nepal, there is also a distinct character that defines the country – the caste system. Some may argue that this social system which historically bounded Nepali people and their social relations has been abolished in the public area. However, I contend that this system is deeply rooted in the society and is still very much influential in determining people's social relations and behaviours. This will be elaborated in the later section.

Due to the lack of job opportunities and sociocultural limitation to advancing their education, a sizable portion of low caste population have chosen to seek jobs abroad, prompting social changes within migrants' household and community. These social changes is the main points of my research paper and what I would like to understand more about, driven by my personal experience.

This study departs from my own observations and interactions with Nepali people when I started working in Kathmandu in 2012. With little knowledge I had about the culture and caste system in particular, I started noticing some practices and the people's behaviors which, I assume, are linked with their social position within the caste system. For instance, grouping among the people with particular surnames<sup>1</sup> were often spotted and the interactions among the people with different caste were limited at an individual level. This experience seemed more obvious in a rural areas in which 83 per cent of the total population of Nepal resides. (Sijapati et al. 2015: 6) In a rural setting, certain ethnic or caste groups tend to reside in the same area.

Moreover, at the same time, I have also noticed that majority of male in a rural area had migrated abroad for work, regardless of their caste background. When the migrants returned home, they were very much celebrated and looked proud while many other young male looked upon them as "successful migrants".

This experience has provided me an idea, which seemed very much naïve at that time, that an economic success through labour migration could uplift the perceived status, not caste, of migrants and their families and that this change would bring a shift in social relations that are different from the traditional social relations which were pre-defined by one's caste.

There is another aspect to this study of labour migration in rural Nepal. Since migration population is highly male-dominant area – over 95 per cent of migrants in 2014-2015 was male and female migrants has a mere share in migrant population (*ibid.*), therefore, in

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, a caste or ethnic group can be identified by a person's surname. In this regard, it is not uncommon in Nepal to ask for the surname when people meet for the first time.

the rural village, male-absent households are easily observed. Because of my study scope – social impacts of migration in migrants' home – most of my study participants were female members of migrant households.

This provides me another angle to be integrated into my study – gender. Nepal is a patriarchal society and most social practices, which are heavily influenced by caste system, also male-focused such as marriage, manhood and division of labour within household and society. Though the government introduced a mandate to have women represented in political and public institutions, however, many of social and political affairs are considered to be men's job. In this regard, it would be very much interesting to see the female perspectives on changes at home and within community, due to labour migration of their male family member(s).

In the village, named Devnagar, in the district of Chitwan in Nepal in which I volunteered as a primary teacher, I observed some trends that presumably are attributed to the labour migration such as the children of migrants going to the private schools, building a concrete house or the increased participation of low caste women in the community events.

In this paper, I try to look into the linkage between the benefits of labour migration and the associated effects in the social relations, particularly the impacts on the social status of the low caste households.

My research questions are as follows:

What sociocultural impacts does low-skilled Nepalese labour migration have upon their households and their communities?

- 1) What does the symbolic social status as “successful migrants” implicate in changing social relations in migrants' household



and community?

- 2) How does low-caste migrants' changed status with economic success affect their social relations that had been heavily influenced by the caste system previously?

Firstly, I provide the context of labour migration trends in Nepal and that of the research site – Chitwan. I explain the historical background of caste system and its dynamics that are still dominant in determining social relations in Nepali society. I then identify several other social and political factors that presumably affected the caste relations of the past. Following that, I analyze some literature on the sociocultural effects of labour migration both in Nepal and other contexts.

The following chapter provides the theoretical framework which is central to my analysis, employed by the work of Bourdieu, - the concept of *capital* and the relations of different forms of *capitals*. In the analysis, I attempt to understand how the existence of economic, cultural and social *capital* is transformed into symbolic *capital*, which is recognized by the members of the community and reconfigures the social relations across different castes. The conversions of between different *capitals* are implicitly shown, sometimes explicitly, in the narratives of the interviews and discussions.

I did my field research in Devnagar, Chitwan in Nepal during the summer in 2016 and used qualitative research methods, such as interview, focus group discussion and participatory observation. I describe the challenges and limitation of my methods and discuss how my positionality with the research subject and objects has shaped my methods and findings.

My paper finally suggests that international labour migration would open up the potential of social transformation, through social benefits

associated with economic betterment. Even though the impact of (success of) labour migration on liberation of low caste people is still ambiguous, nevertheless, it should not be trivialized as it provides some basis for their changing social relations that in turn, influences their perceived social positions.

## **2. Context**

### **1) Migration trend in Nepal**

Migration has become a major livelihood means for the poor in the last decades and the number of labour migrants continue to grow in the low quartile of economic wealth. It is expected that the population with the lowest economic status are less likely to seek foreign employment since the cost of migration is too high and it is the population with low-level of education attainment with limited means of livelihood who are likely to go abroad for work. (Sijapati et al. 2015: 10)

Still, a majority of migrant population chooses to go to India for work – due to the cultural and geographical proximity and the open border system between two countries – however, most of migrants or their families that are studied here have worked in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia.

The large number of labour migrants to GCC countries and Malaysia have low levels of education and economic opportunities available to them. It is not coincidental that these migrants are from low level of social status which is highly correlated with caste system in Nepal.

This population group, with primary to secondary levels of education, continues to find seeking jobs in the domestic market difficult and to go abroad for employment opportunities. This is particularly so since the supply of labour that requires no- or low-skills is greater than the

demand for this labour category within the domestic job market. Thus, this group are more likely to end up going to Malaysia and the GCC countries where the demand for low-skilled workers continues. (Sijapati et al. 2015)

The level of education attainment among Nepali migrants is low, which could be associated with their social status as a low caste. This link helps to understand the identity and social mobility struggle through migration that the low caste youth are facing. (Maharjan et al. 2015)

A study of migration effects in Khotang district in Nepal also shows that “caste and ethnicity status is related to migration rate” in the studies area. Migration is concentrated among Dalits, followed by *Janajatis*. In terms of economic status of migrants, the highest rate of migration is found among the middle class, followed by ‘non-poor’ and ‘poor’ group. (Adhikari and Hopley 2011)

The notion of “successful migrant”, which is directly linked to the migrant’s overseas earnings, set a role model for young people in the community who aspire to work abroad. However, increasing number of academics have pointed out that the motives of migration are not only economic but also social such as pressure from the families, identity struggle as a becoming a manhood through migration or desire to consume modern commodities, as identified in Sharma’s (2013) ethnographic work in India.

## **2) The caste system in Nepal**

The caste system is one of distinctive culture and practices of Nepal which provided the legal structure in the past and still influences social structure of Nepalese people today.

When Prithvi Narayan Shah united Nepal in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, where diverse communities with their own language and religion had

previously settled, and established the kingdom he used the caste system to organize the hierarchical order. Opting for Hindu-culture, which was dominantly practiced by Nepali-speaking Brahmins and other ruling caste, continued to be reinforced through the Rana regime. (Pradhan 2011)

During the Rana regime (1846-1951), the Legal Code, called *Ain* and *Muluki Ain* after the modification, was created to provide the overarching framework under the Hindu caste, dictating social practices and mobility of the people in Nepal. In the process, a significant number of non-Hindu ethnic groups have been integrated into the Hindu framework and were given a ranking. This code also represents the different yet discriminatory treatment and punishment instructions for different castes, making the highest caste group – Brahmins – unpunishable of any capital punishment. Nevertheless, violating certain rules, such as eating rice together or cohabiting with low caste, could bring the sinner's high caste status down to the lower caste which means that their material and spiritual role within the system would be altered/degraded. (Sharma 1977)

From 1962 until 1990 when the king Mahendra ruled the country, so called Panchayat democracy, the development efforts of expanding educational opportunities were concentrated on already-privileged group such as Brahmins, some Chhetris and some advantaged Newars. These groups were already well-connected and resourced with education and literacy. (Gellner 2007)

The Constitution of 1990 provided a legal framework which gave equal rights to all citizens and prohibited all forms of discrimination based on religion, caste, language or ethnicity. However, the political and government domains are still highly dominated by high-caste such as Brahmins. (Pradhan 2011)

There still exists a great disparity between the upper-caste Brahmins

and other privileged caste, in terms of “employment in the civil service, in the education sector, in leadership of political parties, in the development and NGO sector.” (*ibid.*: 108)

*Characteristics (low caste vs. high caste)*

The *Muluki Ain* provided hierarchies among caste and ethnic groups in Nepal and it comprises of 5 main divisions – from the highest to the lowest ranking: the “Tagadhari” (Wearers of the holy thread), “Namasinya Matwali” (Non-enslavable alcohol drinkers), “Masinya Matwali” (Enslavable alcohol drinkers), “Pani Na Chalne” (Impure but touchable), and “Impure and untouchable”. (Gellner 2007: 1823)

The occupational association amongst different castes is also a prominent feature of the caste system. Although the occupation for high caste is not determined by their caste status, traditionally the job association to caste applies only to the lower castes in Nepal, from carpenter to blacksmith, depicted in their surnames. This physical labour category, whose characteristic is recognized as demeaning in nature creates certain cultural meanings. This cultural meaning works to distinguish between the people who are involved in manual labour and who works in an “office” and establish a social hierarchy. (Nightingale 2011: 161)

The main occupation for high caste generally is priest for Brahmins or politicians or government officer for Ksatriya caste. Their occupation derives also from the fact that they own land – thus either as a peasant who do farming or landlord whose income comes from the rent. (Sharma 1977: 281)

A certain economic pattern is correlated with certain affiliation of ethnicity with the influence of geographical location e.g., Tibetan ethnic identity linked with their herding and trading economic activities and *Parbatiya* more involved in agriculture. (Levine 1987)

Though the caste system is no longer valid in a legal sense, it continues to bound Nepalese people socially.

### *Caste mobility*

Since the ethnic and caste system was developed and reinforced by the state, attempting to unify the diversified country, people's response was also created. The responses were conforming to Hindu ruling and norms, on the one hand and trying to perpetuate their position through caste endogamy (Sharma 1977) or attempting to improve their status within the national caste system on the other hand. In the case of ethnic and caste groups in Humla district, it suggests that the caste and ethnic boundaries are permeable and caste transition are possible mainly through intermarriage. (Levine 1987)

The upward caste mobility was achievable by the low caste groups through hypergamy, a low caste women taken by a high caste man. Even though the children of this inter-caste couple would be treated with that level of high caste, nevertheless, the wife and husband still have to follow the commensal segregation rules strictly in order to retain their newly-acquired caste status. (Sharma 1977)

It is worth noting that the social mobility in Nepal is significantly different from that in India. The cases of caste mobility in India happen through the collective movements and negotiation between the certain caste group and the authorities, however, in Nepal the instances of mobility happen in an individual or family setting. (Chandra 1997; Sharma 1977) In any cases, this upward caste mobility speaks only to the high-low caste interrelationships and the untouchables are excluded from this transformation.

### *Janajati movement and Maoist propaganda*

As addressed above, the Nepalese society has been dominated by Hindu-based *Parbatiyas* and other ethnic groups were silenced in the public arena for a long time, making them marginalized. Today, since the abolition of the caste system, the discriminatory distinction among the caste hierarchy is said to become blurred and the low caste groups voice their rights in the public. In this paper, I make an attempt to attribute this change on caste perception and mobility to labour migration and economic achievement of low caste people. However, I must also acknowledge other factors that might have influenced the loosening of caste rigidity. Two historical events have caught my attention.

One is “the people’s movement” (*Jan andolan*) and also referred to as *Janajati* movement which was driven by anti-Brahmanism. In 1990, the Panchayat regime collapsed and was overthrown by the people after months of demonstration. As a result, the Hindu-based regime which did not recognize the diverse ethnic groups and discouraged the ethnic and caste affiliations gave a way to formulate a more inclusive constitution. The new constitution recognized Nepal as “a multi-ethnic, multilingual, democratic independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom”. (Gellner 2007: 1825)

Ethnic difference gained increasing appearance in the political debate and in 1990, NEFIN (Nepal Association of Indigenous Nationalities), which was founded with the objective of uplifting *janajatis*, has been boosting the movement ever since. Finally, on February 10, 2002, the government made a list of 59 *Janajati* groups and provided reserved seats in public organizations such as political, administrative and educational institutions. (ibid.)

The Maoist insurgency – also known as “People’s War’ was launched on February 12, 1996 against the Government of Nepal – used a rhetoric tactic that included fighting “against inequality in caste, ethnicity and gender relations along with geographical discrimination”. (Nightingale 2011: 154)

The Maoist group particularly targeted ethnic groups in their war to bring communism to the rest of the country. As a result, the government retained their control in main cities and the Maoist got a hold of their power in rural areas. As narrated by Dalit man and women in Nightingale’s research in rural Mugu district of Nepal, there has seemed to be less discrimination after the Maoist came, however, it was also emphasized that their historical feudal relationship and associated social practices were not being dismantled easily. (ibid.: 158)

The intention of the Maoist’s propaganda to include ethnic and caste inequality is still unclear, however, the impact of their political armed conflict is considerable in a sense that the ethnic groups and disadvantaged caste groups increased their voice in public arena. (Gellner 2007: 1827)

### **3. Literature review**

#### **1) Sociocultural effects of labour migration**

Several case studies of social impact of migration in Tajikistan, Pakistan, Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Nepal (Khuseynova 2013; Siegmann 2010; Levitt 1998; Taylor et al. 2004; Korzenevica 2015), show that social impacts of labour migration are not deterministically positive or negative. For instance, in the case of Pakistan, the existing male-dominated practices were reinforced as a result of migration and the labour migration of male also barred the



women from its potential benefits. (Siegmann 2010) The studies of Guatemala labour migration and its social impacts show a different story, although variant at different degrees. The male migrants' exposure to the values and practices in the US have changed their ideas of gender roles and after their returns, they began to contribute to household work which had been considered typically as women's work. (Taylor et al. 2004)

In the case of Filipino migrant domestic workers, the translocality between the migrants' hometown in the Philippines and Hong Kong where they migrate for employment, brings out gendered practices and transformations. The status of non-migrants is, which is linked to farming is conceived as "rough" and the one of migrant workers is portrayed as "attractive" and "modern". (McKay 2001: 14) Despite of the manual labour of domestic work that Filipino women engage in at the low status in the host countries, their perceived status is reconfigured and upgraded in the home community because a sense of "going abroad" has become a form of cultural capital as analyzed by Kelly and Lusia (2006).

It is also important to consider not only the circulation of ideas but also the one of material goods and its significance to the changing social relations. As Schiller et al. (1992) puts, the materials goods are embedded in social relations and when migrants bring brand new flat screen TV home, this will change the material culture of ones' society. Labour migration is believed to bring out some changes in social relations between migrants and non-migrants. In a place like Nepal, where a decade-long tradition of patro-client relationship amongst different caste groups has been practiced, migration has created another dimension in this relation. The study of changed caste relations due to international labour migration, done by Sunam (2014), shows that low-caste overseas migrants have experienced

different sets of values while working abroad and started to abandon old customs that have been constraining them for decades.

However, it should not be overlooked that the factor of Maoist insurgency which has influenced pre-existing social relations. During the time of Maoist revolt, the Maoist cadres and their supporters propagated that the oppressive caste system has to be abolished and insisted on the equality among the people.

In Nepal, where patron-client relationship was the foundation of the social relations of the people of different caste, this relationship is being dismantled, as shown in that the tenant-landowner relations has changed more in favour of tenants. With the regular remittance flowing into the tenant households, and their availability and interest in farming have been declining and their once-heavily-dependent-on-landlord attitudes are no longer necessary for their livelihoods. (Adhikari and Hogley 2011)

The land ownership, which was considered to be the assets of higher-caste is also becoming available and affordable for the lower-caste people as well. The low-caste group, mostly Dalits, use their surplus remittance to buy the land in the village. Furthermore, confidence and economic independence, coupled with rights awareness, helped to break the traditional and hierarchical relations between the historically-disadvantaged group and the higher-caste group. These changes are particularly attributed to the economic growth and independence in lower-caste households. (*ibid.*)

As the study of migration effects in Khotang district in Nepal shows, more women organize and participate the community's religious and festive activities and this changing practice would bring a shift in the role of men and women and their interactions. Pressure from neighbours to a woman in the house to behave appropriately while their husbands are away also gives women an added burden.

Moreover, changing role of women in household comes from family-related decision-making, child-rearing issues, maintaining marital relationship. (*ibid.*)

There are several studies that look into the impacts of labour migration success on caste status or perceived social status. The study by Chandra (1997) shows that the sizable number of people from Kanbi tribal group in India, which was the poor members of the community migrated to East Africa from the early 1920s. With their economic achievement through migration, coupled with their numerical dominance, political movements and adaptation of Brahmanical lifestyles, they earned an ungraded caste name, Patidar which was then recognized by the official census authorities. (Chandra 1997)

Again, social mobility in Nepal seems to differ from that of India, as the unit of mobility in this case is the group, not an individual or a family. (Sharma 1977; Chandra 1997)

## **2) Social relations around the caste system**

In Nepal where the caste system is still prevalent in the people's mindsets, determining their social relations including marriage, the element of different ethnic groups also makes their social dynamics more unique and dynamic. Mind that there are also variations among one ethnic group and caste which makes it more complex and diverse. The perceived status of caste and ethnic groups does not necessarily correspond. For instance, the Newar ethnic group, the original tribe of Kathmandu valley and is considered to belong to the lower caste, has achieved economic success and are well-known for their adeptness at business. With their improved economic power, the Newar group has been playing a dominant role in public and business sector, giving them a sense of uplifted status, other than their low

caste. Other janajati groups who hold land or other resources with social connections to the state and/or the palace, such as the Newars and Thakalis have enjoyed their privileged position with the success of trading and business. (Gellner 2007: 1825) In fact, the Newars and the Thakalis in particular are better off educationally and economically amongst *janajatis*.

In the caste study done by Nightingale (2002), which looks at the intersection of gender and caste in forest group participation in north-western Nepal, it is rather clear that pre-existing caste system, thought abolished by law, still defines the level of participation and membership of the forest group, which is dominant of Brahmins and Thakuri caste. Furthermore, the spatial arrangement also plays a role for the members of forest user group. For example, if the meeting is held in higher-caste woman's house, the lower-caste members would sit outside, even though they were not told to do so, and only speak loudly towards inside when/if they want to contribute to the meeting. An interesting observation from this study drew me an attention when the wealthiest man in the village, who belongs to lower-caste group, would sit inside the higher-caste member's house and changed his eating habits similar to the one of higher-caste. The salient reason for his overcoming caste distinctions was, in my view, that he had economic power which would be translated into social power.

As Nightingale (2003) puts it rightly, community forestry is a good example of social relations which manifest social, political and cultural aspects of Nepalese society. In Nepal, the community forest is now managed by the community itself and the government institutionalized its management as forest user groups. Villagers who hold a membership of this group can collect leaf litter, grass, firewood and timber for their own consumption and/or sell the products.

Caste relations are still shown in the power dynamics and the

membership of the forest user group. According to the Nepal-Australia Community Forestry Project, some people who had been living in the forest area have been excluded from the group while other people with more powerful status have been granted a membership. (*ibid.* :532) This forest group is also a place where contested identity and social status happen and produced. A number of cases have been emerged where a group's leader who is from the higher caste was opposed by the group members over some incidents and removed. This would not be possible when the entrenched social relations and practices were defined by the caste system.

Since the wealth was measured in land until today, one's power and social status is highly correlated with the land ownership. A significant share of land ownership has been historically concentrated among the high caste and other advantaged janajatis such as the Newars or Thakalis. Conversely, landless groups such as Dalit tended to be dependent on others or migrate elsewhere for work and land. Some joined the Gorkha army and used their pension to invest in land later. (Gellner 2007) From my field work, I have also noticed that how important it is for the locals, especially the ones in the lower caste, to be able to own land. Many interviewees have mentioned that they bought land with savings from remittance or plans to buy land once they save enough money.

There are some, though not many, studies available which focus on changing social relations of low caste or marginalized groups due to international labour migration. (Carwell and De Neve 2014, cited in Sunam 2014)

A recent study of perceptions towards labour migration in Nepal argues that "migrated people can respect among non-migrating community members probably because of their economic achievement, regained masculinity, ability to become protector and

provider to family, or even maintaining the lost glory of the family.” (Maharjan et al. 2015: 371)

A newly acquired, often upgraded, symbolic status of Nepali migrants with accumulation of wealth and human and social capital often indicates that, as Sunam’s (2014) work shows, low caste Nepali migrants started to influence gender and social relations and contest caste/class relations that have been constraining them for decades.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

##### **1) *Capitals* by Pierre Bourdieu**

The society is composed of different social spaces – Bourdieu calls them fields – and the actors within each field continually contest and negotiate their social positions. (Siisiainen 2000)

For Bourdieu, capital is power and power is the possession of capital and the ability to influence its value. It is not only about economic accumulation but other forms of accumulated values that are socially constructed. The actors within each field become powerful and obtain certain social status when they possess *capital* – economic, cultural and social capital – and the ownership of these resources is “legitimized through the mediation of symbolic capital.” (*ibid.*: 2)

Bourdieu outlined a term *doxa*, referred to systems of classification of classes, based on sex, age, or position, which reproduce the power relations that seem self-evident and undisputed. (Bourdieu 1977) It is often referred to as “the rules of the game” in a society. The caste system in Nepal operates in a similar way – for a hundred of years of dominance by the ruling high caste which created some artificial hierarchical boundaries within the system, accompanying different sets of practices was not contested or questioned until the recent time when Nepal declared as democratic republic and rights awareness

campaigns and movements began. The dispositions and certain behaviours, which Bourdieu calls *habitus*, are socially-constructed and influenced by *doxa* and one's social status – varying at the degree of one's ability to control over different forms of capital.

In his understanding, the economic, social and cultural capital may be converted into the other – contingent and convertible. This thought is useful when studying the social impacts of labour migration. The economic remittance may appear to be primary in some contexts and social implications may be given little attention. However, when economic value of labour migration is considered in a transnational context its social implications are as significant as the economic ones. (Kelly and Lusis 2006)

In the case of Filipino migrant workers, economic capital which translates into the physical assets such as buying land and luxury goods, transforms into social and cultural ones and gives some sense of upward mobility with the new social networks, acquired through migration. (*ibid.* :840) In the similar vein, it is often the case that “people can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in...”. (Bourdieu 2000: 19)

“Membership in groups, and involvement in the social networks developing within these and in the social relations arising from the membership can be utilized in efforts to improve the social positions of the actors in a variety of different fields.” (Siisiainen 2003: 12) In the context of the rural areas in Nepal like Devnagar in Chitwan, the examples to measure social capital would be membership in the associations and groups such as forest user group, women's saving groups, parents group for schools or voluntary associations to deal with social works and other development organizations at the local level.

Factoring in social capital in my analysis is crucial because economic factor alone cannot and should not explain the changing dynamics of the social relations. Memberships in social groups and associations in the community can have a multiplier effect on other forms of capital and together with economic and cultural factors, the interchangeable nature of different forms of capital can help explain the upgraded perceived status of the low caste labour migrants in my findings.

Social capital influences symbolic capital, which more known as “prestige”, the accumulation of which may help migrant families to gain other capitals in the form of power, wealth and allies. (Poerter et al. 2011)

In Bourdieu’s argument about symbolic capital is that “economic, cultural, and social capital becomes meaningful and socially effective only through the process of symbolic translation.” (Siisiainen 2000: 14) Through “mutual cognition and recognition”, certain social values and capital are given a symbolic character that helps to internalize in the structure, which, in turn, is transformed into symbolic capital. (*ibid.*:12-13) Symbolic capital is particularly effective in influencing and determining actors’ practices and it reconfigures who has access to certain forms of privilege.

Poerter et al. (2011) finds the transformation of symbolic capital in the context of labour migration in the following way:

“The successful migrant’s symbolic capital increases back home. Sending remittances, investing in land, housing, or their children’s education, or bringing gifts increases the migrants’ prestige locally and enhances the social positions of their household.” (Poerter et al. 2011: 29)

To follow the workings of the structure and *habitus* – which is



reciprocally influential and dialectic, one's social status is also continually contested and negotiated with fluid transformation of different capitals.

Social capital, as understood by Bourdieu, does not necessarily function as a major social change as long as this capital is working to maintain or reinforce the existing hierarchies and oppressive system. In a contrast to the mainstream social capital theory, as captured and well demonstrated in women's microfinance program such as Grameen model where social networks and women's solidarity groups are meant to be harmonious and benign, the social capital needs to be understood the interplay of individual and socio-cultural structure within the system. (Rankin 2002)

In his view, social capital runs a risk of fostering coercive and oppressive existing system, rather than cooperation and collective action. In a women's microfinance program in Bangladesh, the member selection is based on caste, ethnic or kin relations and the members encounter with fierce peer pressure and scrutinization for repayment schedule. (*ibid.*) In a similar vein, a supposed-to-be harmonious women's clubs in Devnagar saw some level of separation between the different caste – it will be discussed in the later section.

## **2) Intersectionality**

I am using the concept of “intersectionality” as my analytical tool because it helps understand the ambiguous nature of changing social dynamics in relation to labour migration. In other words, social relations are determined and reinforced with the intersection of gender, caste, ethnicity, and material status.

McCall already pointed out the complexity of intersectionality to include “multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis”

makes demanding specific research methods more challenging. (McCall 2005: 1772) By looking at already constituted social groups and their unequal relationships, it focuses on the empirical realities of the existing social groupings across the chosen analytical categories, allowing systematic comparison among multiple social groups. (*ibid.*: 1785-1786)

In my analysis, two social variables, namely caste and ethnicity, are interpreted as interlinked and intertwined terms. As addressed earlier, even though caste and ethnicity should not be correspondently used, nevertheless, they work in a similar way in creating and reinforcing certain social boundaries and practices. (Nightingale 2011: 154) Most ethnic groups, referred as *janajatis* here in this paper, are regarded as low caste group except very few fraction of groups among Newar group. For the sake of simplicity and comprehension, I limit other categorical dimensions, thus, gender and is cross-classified with caste/ethnicity here. Nevertheless, the complexity of inequalities and changing social relations among different groups is illustrated in the narratives of the people I had interaction with on the field.

Social positions are influenced by a set of different social identities and their relations within a certain structure. While their social positions and social practices, which come with their own status, are continuously contested and negotiated in the course of their life path change, their own identities, such as women, low or high caste or ethnicity also play a part in the process.

Even though the academic trend of intersectionality is not uniformly theorized and practiced, it sheds lights on understanding the working of mutually reinforcing social forces such as gender, caste, ethnicity, and material status that have impacts on one's social position and behaviours. (Brewer et al. 2002: 4)

The interplay of individual's lived experiences that are derived from their social identities and the structural realities, which is, in my case, the economic and political situations of Nepal, is depicted in some of the narratives from my field research.

All of my focus group discussants and 61.5 percent of my interviewees were female members of migrant family – 71 percent of interviewees from low caste were female and 40 percent of high caste interviewees were women. Nearly half of the interviews in high caste group were done by the fathers or the returned migrants themselves. On the other hand, all of the low caste female interviewees, except one, were wives of migrants.

The discrepancy of the numbers of female interviewees on different caste can be explained with their family setting and history. The usual family unit in rural Nepal is comprised of 3 generations – extended family. The high caste groups in the village were one of the first group of people who came to this area when it was opened for settlement. They acquired their own land and have been living in the area ever since. It is no surprising to see that the male member of the family who has the highest familial authority – usually the father of migrants – would step up for an interview or greet a guest at their home.

Most low caste people who live in my research area, on the other hand, have shorter history of their settlement, dwelling on the side of forest area. Their family is mostly nuclear one, leaving most of the families with father or husband-absent status. The residential area adjacent to the forest, in which most of my interviewees of low caste lives, is government-owned land and technically they are occupying the land unlawfully. Having no land of their own has been a constant reminder for them of their landless low caste status, which they are seemingly trying to uplift with economic improvement through labour migration.

## **5. Methodology**

### **1) Chitwan (Devnagar) as a research site**

I chose Chitwan as my research site for three following reasons.

First, it is the one of the top cities that sends migrants abroad. The recent data on labour migration shows that a significant share of the people leaving for foreign employment are from the Tarai areas of Nepal, in which Chitwan is one of the major cities.

Second, the region has been the ethnic melting pot since the programme of Malaria eradication took place in the 1950s and 1960s, meaning a good mix of people from different caste and ethnic groups, Janajatis, has dwelled here.

In the past, Tarai region has not been a popular settlement area for Nepalis since this area was heavily populated with much of forest and jungle and less of inhabitants. It also had the highest rate of endemic disease like Malaria. (Gellner 2007:1824) However, due to its fertile land for agriculture and warm climate, coupled with the success of the Malaria eradication, it began to attract more people from the hills (caste-based people).

Lastly, I chose Chitwan because I have known this place through my personal encounter and connection. In particular, I volunteered in a government secondary school in Devnagar, Chitwan where I stayed in August 2016 for the research.

### **2) Semi-structured interviews**

I have interviewed the former and current migrants and/or their families in the research area in August 2016. The list of interviewees was provided by one of my acquaintances from the village who is

socially active in the village and whose sociopolitical status is well-established from the generations. I have noted that the potential interviewees were well-mixed in terms of geographical and caste perspectives and it was possible as he, who is Brahmin, happens to live near the jungle area where the low caste population is concentrated. In Nepal, the people with similar castes tend to dwell in the same area and this common practice was witnessed again while doing the interviews.

The interviews were taken twice daily – in the early morning and the late afternoon – in order to avoid the sizzling and hot time of the day when the villagers would rather take a nap to recharge their energy for the chores in the late afternoon.

The interview was semi-structured, giving some room for maneuvering during the process. I had chosen some themes and a set of open questions prior to the interviews. The reason why I chose semi-structured interviews were as follows: first, I wanted to make the interview to flow as smooth as possible so that the interviewees do not feel uncomfortable in that setting and second, it gave me some level of freedom to tailor some of the pre-determined questions according to the real time situation and context.

Most of my interviewees were the migrant's wife or mother (22 out of 39) who are left home. 23 interviewees belong to low caste, 15 from high caste and 1 from middle caste. The discrepancy of the actual interviewees in terms of caste, in a contrast to the list I was given, can be explained that I was only able to interview the people who were present in their house or at close proximity at the time when I visited them.

### **3) Focus group discussions**

I conducted two focus group discussions to obtain more insights

about effects of labour migration in a group setting. I had twenty women from the village who participated the discussions and at least one member from their family, mostly their son or/and husband, has worked abroad (some of them are still abroad).

I invited two group of ten women, one comprising of high caste and the other from low caste. Initially, it was not my intention to divide the groups based on the caste difference. However, the same person who gave me the list of my interviewees recommended to have the group in this way because it would create more comfortable setting to talk without being conscious about the people from other caste.

During the discussions, the lower caste people tended to be more careful and seem hesitant when they talked about their changed behavior or attitude towards the high caste people after they have achieved some level of economic success through migration. Their hesitation would have been greater if it had been a group of mixed people from different castes. In the similar vein, the high caste women were able to express their genuine feelings regarding the economic growth and independence of the low caste people.

#### **4) Challenges and limitations**

##### *Language*

I speak Nepali language at an intermediate level. I understand and can make conversation with locals, however, I decided to hire an interpreter for my research. Since I was not from the village, I needed someone from the area who knows the people and the dynamics among the villagers. More importantly, I wanted to avoid some confusion or errors when translating my interviews.

However, there were some challenges while searching for an interpreter in the village. It was difficult to find a person who could speak good enough English to be able to help my work. A number of

young people moved to other towns for a better education. Those who do not have resources to afford better quality school which are not present in this village go to a government school where they are taught in Nepali hence have a poor command in English.

I hired a young male student from the village who attends a college at a nearby town and happened to be on a summer break. However, I had to change my first interpreter after a few days since he was not good at interpreting as expected. Sometimes during the interviews, I had to correct him while he was explaining my questions to the interviewee because he was conveying incorrect messages.

The second interpreter, a young female college student from the village, was better in terms of her English and her understanding of my research objectives and directions. After the first experience, I learned that it is equally important to have a shared understanding of my research topic with an interpreter. Additionally, hiring a female interpreter worked better in this setting since most of my interviewees were female.

### *My positionality*

When I decided to go to Devnagar as my research site, I knew that I would have both advantages and constraints for carrying out my research.

The advantages are that I know the area and the people and that they know me as well. In 2012 I volunteered in a government school in the village where most of the kids from Devnagar go to and I became known to the local kids and their parents. They are friendly with me so I would have no problem to approach them and ask for their time for my interviews.

The constraints also come from the fact that I am known in the community. The family of my Nepalese partner, is well-known in the

village because my partner's grandfather was among the first people who settled there and also became involved many development projects and social work in that area. As a family member, though foreign, of a renowned high caste family who possesses a connection with the royal power, there are some "unspoken rules" regarding my boundaries with the villagers.

My perceived status among my interviewees and the people in Nepal in general also comes from my nationality as South Korean - being associated with financial power that is perceived by many Nepali people. It is not so surprising that many of villagers, including some from my interviewees, have approached me inquiring for a way to obtain employment in South Korea.

### *Ethics*

As much as I was trying to remain a neutral position regarding stories of the people from low caste, I was finding myself sympathizing more with the low caste interviewees than the high caste ones. Even though they have been improving their living conditions over the past years through the economic ease, due to labour migration that I argue, their plights are clearly seen in what they wear, eat and in which living environment they are surrounded.

Since I was from South Korea which is becoming a popular labour migration destination among Nepalis, I had several encounters with some people from the village, asking for a way to obtain employment in South Korea. Furthermore, the fact that I was conducting interviews regarding the issue of labour migration, it was inevitable that the people might have misunderstood the purpose of my research, thinking that they would somehow benefit from participating in my interviews. Of course, I did not give them any false hope and promises, however, this issue was needed to be dealt with



throughout my research period.

## **6. Findings & discussions**

### **1) Behavioural change**

#### *Behavioural change in a spousal/family relationship*

A number of interviewees said that their spousal or family relationship has become more amicable since their husband or son's migration regardless of their caste status.

According to their accounts, their husband or son quit many bad habits after they went abroad. According to them, their bad habits included drinking, smoking, squandering money and impoliteness in their words or attitudes towards their spouse. One low-caste woman said about the post-migration change as "*after the migration, good man and good life*". Many interviewees mentioned that the migrants became more responsible after the migration and now wanted to save money rather than spending the savings on their enjoyment or leisure. The newly developed habits are male migrants beginning to help in the housework such as cleaning, cooking, washing, or farming activities.

This change is noticeable in a Nepalese setting where squandering of money and domestic violence which are associated with alcohol consumption of male family members are one of the major social problems across all castes. (Nightingale 2011: 159) This issue seems to be more prominent in rural areas where the economy is based on agricultural activities. The familiar picture of the rural parts of Nepal is depicted as such that women are working on the field while men, including young boys, play a board game near the small shop in the village.

The gendered division of activities is still prevalent today in rural

Nepal, however, during the time of my field research in Devnagar, I was told by many that the change of this scene is also slowly happening. Nevertheless, I am careful to say that labour migration is the sole factor in this change.

The positive change in the spousal relationship between a wife and a migrant was also found. Many of the interviewees stated that their marriage is on the friendly term now than before and they do not have a quarrel anymore since their husband's migration. They seemed content with their current status of the relationship despite the fact that the couple had to endure a long-distance relationship while the husbands are away.

There were, of course, some households which seemed to have no significant post-migration changes in their migrant spouses' behaviour and their relationship. Two of low caste women talked of no changes in their spouse's behavior and their relationships and one Dalit woman mentioned that her good spousal relationship remained the same prior to and after migration.

The interviewees attributed the change in their relationship to the ease of the tension regarding their economic situation before the migration. Many low caste women responded that the couple argued frequently over the economic concerns before the migration. One low caste woman said, during the interview, that "distance and money have made us closer".

Some interviewees also mentioned that the migrants have become to value their family and time. One woman from the focus group discussion said that her husband would spend more time with her than before and cherish their time together.

#### *More confident after migration*

Some migrants and their family began to notice some changes in their

attitudes and relationship with their neighbours after migration, primarily within low caste household.

Both groups in the group discussions, high and low caste women, mentioned that they are more confident and satisfied with their life, compared to the pre-migration period, largely due to the economic improvement. Many of them argued that they are no longer financially dependent on their neighbours and/or relatives, therefore, they can pursue their own life goals without worrying too much about the money.

This change seemed particularly noticeable within the low caste migrant households. A low caste migrant who has returned home temporarily told me that with the remittance, he had given his neighbours a loan when they had a financial plight. He continued to explain of the change in his relationship with his neighbours, saying that “with the money earned abroad, people respect (also translated as “like”) us more”. One low caste woman also accounted for a similar sentiment that “labour migration does not necessarily bring development for the country but some respect from neighbours”.

One high caste women from the focus group discussion admitted that the dominant and submissive relationship between the low and high caste, to lesser extent, still existed. However, she also mentioned that economic success of low caste family through labour migration presumably affected this relationship that “now the low caste people have become more confident to talk to them (high caste people)”.

Not only did their confidence increase due to the economic benefits that migration brings, the level of their credibility among neighbours and/or relatives has been positively affected. Some said that they are “able to offer loans to others” and their ideas and concerns seemed to be cared more than before the migration.

This case is particularly relevant to the low caste migrant families.

The low caste people were dependent on the high caste groups due to their lack of financial resources or land ownership in the past. The recognition of social hierarchy, based on the level of available resources or the caste, was still felt among the low caste interviewees and discussants, however, the acquirement of financial independence has provided them a feeling of liberation in a way that the rich high caste people “cannot dominate” the low caste group like before.

## **2) Membership in social group**

### *Forest user group*

Since the forest, which is a part of Chitwan National Park, is in close vicinity to the village, many residents depend on the existence of this natural resources in their daily lives, including animal feed, timber for building a house, a bamboo for making a swing on the festivals etc. Some of the studies on the relationship between the forest user group and the social relations in a Nepal context pointed out that the accessibility to the membership of this group is, to some extent, determined by the social status such as the caste status.

The one-time membership fee is 20 Nepalese Rupees (NRs) and each member are obliged to contribute 5 NRs every month. The main purposes of this group is to protect the community forest from an illegal timber-cutting and sales and to collect leafs and grass for their animal feed.

Most of the interviewees responded that they became the members of the forest user group in Devnagar area before the migration, regardless of their caste status. However, the patterns of their participation to the group varies individually. Some still remain unactive and some became more active after the migration. Others recently joined the group, arguably prompted by the family member’s migration.

In contrast to previous studies about one's caste status being a factor for accessibility to forest user group, my findings, in general, speaks otherwise.

While a number of low caste villagers were encouraged to join the group previously and got engaged in the group after the migration, how the membership translates into their power and capacity for decision-making within the group is still unclear (It is my regret not having included this aspect in my research).

### *Saving clubs*

Most of the interviewees have joined their first or another saving club(s) since their family member started working abroad. Only three interviewees have not joined any saving clubs saying that they would not trust their money in the saving clubs and rather put their remittance in a commercial bank.

In general, the number of saving clubs has increased and of members as well as the number of members in these clubs. Most of low caste households from my interviews have joined a new saving club and some got more active in the activities with which existing clubs are involved. This happened only after their husband or son migrated and started to send money back home.

This practice corresponds with the perception change towards the saving culture that many claimed to have developed over the years after the migration. This change of practice and perception will be dealt in the next section.

For high caste households, it was not a dramatic change in terms of their new membership in these clubs. A number of the high caste women were already a member of one or more saving clubs before the migration. However, a few cases showed that some high caste women became more active in those clubs. One caste stood out that

one high caste woman, a wife of a migrant who is working in Qatar as a security guard, became president of one saving club (*Mahila Samuhar*) which actively involves women from all different castes and plan activities around religious festivals, as well as their initial task – collective saving and loans.

Though some responded that they would prefer to save in their bank account rather than in saving clubs, saving itself has become regarded as a positive change in both low- and high caste families.

An interesting point is that while many of low caste households joined single or multiple saving club after the migration, they tend to join different ones from the ones in which high caste group joins. The names of saving clubs in which both caste households joined were compared to be different, with a few cases of exceptions.

### **3) Contribution to the community projects**

Regardless of their caste status, the people who I have interviewed are aware that social work is very crucial to the development of the community and that one should take a part in it. Community development projects or social work in Devnagar, according to the information from the interviews and discussions, are activities that need collective involvement such as contribution to building or maintaining *mandir* or *gumba*, participation of religious or cultural festival activities such as making a swing in the village for the biggest Hindu festival, *dashain*, cleaning roads and etc.

Not only participating in these activities make the people involved become exposed to the social and political fields but it also shows that those who are involved have resources to take a part in, either contributing financially or in other ways.

There is currently the project of *mandir* extension in the village of which is the landmark in the neighbourhood. Many of my

interviewees positively responded that they were contributing some money or labour into this project, regardless of their caste status. This seemingly-natural reaction is remarkable in a sense that there was a time when low caste people were not even allowed to enter this *mandir*. Many attributed this change on low caste groups' accessibility to religious sites to Maoist propaganda and the series of *janajati* movements.

There were some interesting accounts from the people with low- and high caste during the interview. One low caste woman (Nimala Adhikari, 28 years old), who is a teacher in the government school in the village, stressed the importance of one's contribution to social work for the development of the community and the country. However, after the interview, when we were having informal talks, she contradicted herself with her earlier comment, saying that "money is everything, so in this sense, labour migration brings development for the country and the family." She further stressed her desire to earn more money abroad and complained that the government paid the teacher's salary very low.

Other account happened when interviewing a low caste man (Bim Bahadur Gurung, 43 years old), from Gurung ethnic group, whose brother worked in Qatar and now working Saudi. He mentioned that they started giving more donations towards building a *gumba*, a Buddhist temple, after his brother's migration. He also said that high caste people were only interested in saving money rather than contributing to the good of the community.

#### **4) Assets**

*'Modern' house and luxury items*

Economic capital which migrant families obtain through labour migration can easily be spotted throughout the village – modern

concrete slab house, motorcycle or increased livestock farming. Looking at economic assets when understanding impact of labour migration is particularly useful in my study, because it depicts the social meanings of having these items which help transform into another type of capital, ultimately.

These items are relatively more visual and clearly seen to the neighbours. During my interviews, I was also observing some assets that were not needed to ask such as the appearance of house, TV or electronic appliances, motorcycle and etc. When I asked my interviewees what their future plans are, one low caste woman (Prativa Nepali, 23 years old) said she wished to buy some gold ornaments. She also stated that having gold jewelry would make her feel uplifted and her neighbours would be jealous of her. After her husband went abroad – now he is working in Qatar as an officer runner for the last 3 years – they were able to buy some luxury goods such as TV and home appliances and now they plan to buy some land and build a house in the near future.

You can merely find high caste people living in a mud house with a thatched roof, which is said to be very much vulnerable to rains and insects. Conversely, many low caste families who settled alongside the forest area still live in such housing type. This makes the comparison of living conditions of different castes more prominent.

### *Savings*

Many migrant families started to save after their family member's migration. Saving culture was said to be non-existent in many of the households – mostly in low caste and income households - that I interviewed as well as the surplus from their income. However, this has changed after migration became a popular trend in this village. Some interesting anecdotes and observations were the followings.



From both the interviews and focus group discussions, it was highlighted that having some savings in one's account is as liberating as purchasing land in this particular context. As the primary goal of labour migration is, seemingly, to accumulate one's assets, however, the initial financing is also crucial to make the migration happen. In the process, many migrant aspirants end up borrowing money from their neighbours, families and/or relatives. After few years of working abroad and having paid off the loans they had taken prior to migration, now migrant families started to save their remittance for their own use.

Saving not only provides some sense of financial security as there is no need to be dependent on other as before, it also makes migrant families feel uplifted since they are now able to give others loans. Moreover, having some savings with them means that their credibility level is increased within the community so that they can get more loans when need be.

Finally saving is used for obtaining other types of assets such as providing better quality education or being able to spend more on wedding ceremony and gifts for the children. Throughout the country, the quality of government schools are badly reputed and the children going to the government school is equated with their low level of income or/and caste status. Likewise, being able afford a bigger wedding procession, decorated with luxurious items and accompanied with musical band, also represents certain social level.

### **5) Land ownership**

It was stressed earlier that owning a piece of land in rural setting in Nepal is crucial for landless low caste people and the practice of landownership has become a path for many migrant families. In Devnagar, many of low caste dwellers who built their thatched mud

house on government-owned property have expressed that being landless signifies their low caste status and that this is what needs to be improved in their life path.

A low caste woman from a second focus group discussion explicitly stated that the reason why people migrate for work was because they wanted to buy some land for their own good. Others also agreed with her comment saying that buying land is on top of their wish list and that they also became jealous, “in a good way” (my interpretation), when their neighbor buys land.

Having property asset, for low caste people, does not only speak of possessing economic capital, as it seems, but it also symbolizes and represents obtainment of social and cultural capital. Being able to afford some land and build a house, ultimately, provides them with certain level of pride that they can be now compared with the situation of high caste people.

One low caste woman (Mina Sunwar, 23 years old) told me with smiley face that they were now ready to buy land. Her husband was working in Qatar for 3 years as an office runner and she described her situation as “after migration, good man and good life”. After acquiring land, they planned to build a house on their own land and open a small restaurant since her husband was working as a cook before migration.

From the interactions with her, I sensed that she was very much content with her current life situation with her son now going to a private school, the savings being accumulated and most importantly, being able to have their own place – land and house in the near future. The gatekeeper who provided me with the list of migrants also emphasized the landownership has been the key indicator of one’s sociopolitical status, depicting the caste relationships – landless low caste people depend on high caste landowners creating tenant-

landlord relations. He himself has witnessed several cases of low caste migrants who acquired land ownership with which the migrant families seemed to feel socially upgraded. He further spelled out an example of an economically successful low caste person who moved his residency to another village where he bought a land and changed his surname to the one of higher caste.

## **6) Implications**

*Low-caste people have become involved and/or more active in community affairs*

Unlike the past when the social practices were determined by one's caste status, low caste people have seemed to become more liberated in terms of their accessibility to memberships to sociopolitical community groups and their participation. Among other factors, economic success through labour migration has helped to uplift their confidence about themselves and within the community. This, as a result, boosted up their willingness and capability to join several community groups, such as saving clubs, developmental social organizations and to participate community projects.

Several accounts of low caste women whose husband or son are working abroad, reconfirmed my stance by which they attributed their increased participation to community social and political arena to labour migration.

*High-caste people remained and/or became more active in community affairs*

Unlike the majority of the cases from low caste households, the high caste households have already been involved in community affairs such as participating religious activities, community projects and/or social work.

Few high caste households have gained a new membership in a new saving club, however, others – most of them – have stayed in their existing social or saving clubs. Few households have become more actively involved in organizing some collective events and social work after the migration.

It can be inferred that because of their pre-existing social networks and benefits that come from their high caste status, there has not been a remarkable change with their participation in community affairs. Still, many of the top posts in community organizations and social clubs are headed by high caste people.

Moreover, from discussions of changes due to migration, it is still felt that high caste people still acknowledge the social hierarchy between different castes and want to avoid the mixture with the low caste people. This is manifested in the fact that high caste people choose to join the saving club that are different from the ones which low caste people take membership.

*High-caste people began to look at the low-caste people from different perspective – economic success*

I have noticed that many of my interviewees, regardless of their caste, emphasized the importance of “money” and began to see other people with economic lens. Given that the main reason for migration was economic, this also could shed light on the changing social practices and social positions of low caste people due to the economic achievement through migration.

There is an ambiguous attitude of high caste women towards the characteristics of work their family members are involved in abroad. It was pointed out earlier that high caste people have been involved professionally in education, religious or public institution while it is usually the low caste people who take up manual labour. Given the

fact that most of migrants in my study are involved in manual job, working in a construction site or in a factory, I was very much anxious to hear how a high caste female family member of current migrants would respond to this matter.

In the first round of FGDs, where all participants are high caste, I brought up this issue and asked them how they thought of their family member working in such job category. Their response was rather surprising. They would just shake their head and tell me that “what they do abroad do not really matter. What they bring home (*money – my translation*) is more important now.” One discussant even said that their migrant family member “cleaning toilets” overseas did not bother them and their high caste status would not change because of this.

It seems that they are reluctant to admit their contradicting positions towards their migrant family member working in this manual labour and their caste-imposed ideas that it is the low caste people who are supposed to work in this kind of labour. The mindset of towards certain occupations that are associated with certain castes is still prevalent, as witnessed by Nightingale’s research in rural Mugu district of Nepal, making high caste people avoid certain kinds of job in the village, such as timber cutting, despite of its relatively high earnings. (Nightingale 2011: 160)

Their position on this matter is still puzzling and obscure, nevertheless, on the surface, they seem to have started to recognize the economic success of low caste people, which would not have been possible without labour migration.

*The duration of migration matters when looking into the effects of migration*

One of my questions for the interview was “how long did you work

abroad?”. The intentions of this question was to get general migration profile of each household and try to find a relation between the duration of working abroad and the time when the effects of labour migration is anticipated.

11 households were identified from the interview where a migrant has worked/been working overseas for less than 2 years. Their stories were different from other migrant families whose migration duration was longer in terms of current economic status, derived from labour migration.

In fact, the interviews with them were rather short and silent, compared to other groups. A number of my interviewees whose family member is working/has worked abroad for less than 2 years told that they were still paying off the loan and using the remittance for that purpose only.

It seemed that what they cared about at that moment is how to pay off the loan, that they took from a bank, relatives or neighbours and used to pay the recruitment agency for their migration.

Moreover, most of the children from 11 households whose migration duration is less than 2 years go to the government school in the village, whereas the other group with their migration duration of more than 2 years send their children to an English-medium school.

The narratives indicate that the duration of migration helps to determine when the impacts of migration begin to appear in a sense that the migrant families start to feel the benefits of migration.

However, despite the fact that they have not yet started to see the visible effects of labour migration, such as new houses, luxury goods or savings, they seemed to be aware of the social benefits of what labour migration would bring out. A couple of interviewees said that migration would bring “some respect” from their neighbours. Others responded that with the money earned abroad, “people respect and

like them more”.

*Female member of migrant family is given more freedom to utilize the benefit of migration*

Female members of migrant family are seemingly given more freedom to utilize their resources which come from the labour migration. Not only have women's engagement to the household work and child-rearing responsibilities increased but the women have been also given some opportunities now to attend the social and community meetings and engage in the activities during the absence of their spouses or sons.

However, it is also noted that social areas where women are now taking part in are also gendered. The members of saving clubs are mostly women, in most cases, and men do not take part in this form of saving activity. In this saving club, not only they collect savings and give the needy a loan, they also organize some activities together.

To conclude, female members of migrant family have to deal with the absence of their male family member, however, they now enjoy some level of freedom to maneuver their social activities, utilizing the benefits from labour migration. Still, the benefits are limited to some level and activities in a rural setting.

## **7. Conclusions**

### **1) Summary**

My study attempts to shed lights on the changing social relations of Nepali low caste migrant families and their social mobility through labour migration. It was done through some observations and interactions which I had in the past years when I was working in Nepal and in the month of August this year when I went for the sole

purpose of this research.

Nepal has been sending thousands of its people abroad for employment since it opened its border to outside world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Labour migration is not a new trend as in the past it used to send many Gorkha soldiers on a foreign mission. However, the recent outflux of labour migrants mainly to India, the GCC countries, Malaysia and this trend made Nepal a major labour sending country. There is also certain social dimension to the increasing trend of labour migration. A sizable share of labour migrants to the above mentioned countries are from low social and economic level, which are often linked to their caste status. This is due to the lack of employment opportunities available to them as their qualification in terms of education or skill levels does not match or the social barriers, induced by their low caste status, are still existent in the Nepali society even though the caste-based discrimination was banned publicly.

Often their level of low caste is linked with their status as being landless, poor both in monetary and social terms – social networks and capital, having low level of economic achievement which impede the development of this group. A number of my interviewees explicitly mentioned that those are the reasons that made them seek opportunities abroad.

Because of this type of migration, which involves mostly low-skilled workers – thus, many low caste people with low level of skill and education apply – is contract-based and circular, the study of impact in the households and community in the origin country is justified. Furthermore, it was studied with the narratives of women household members who stay behind since they are in a position, on a surface level, to utilize the resources that were coming from labour migration. I also tried to compare the impacts of labour migration on low caste



families with the ones from high caste in a rural setting.

In my study I employed a concept of *capital*, which was developed by Pierre Bourdieu, to explain the nature of capital which influences the social relations and practices and can be contested and negotiated within the system. In particular, Bourdieu's understanding about different forms of capital is useful since it provides some framework with which these capital may be converted into the other – from economic capital to social one or vice versa.

In the case of rural Nepal, the accumulation of economic capital is often spotted and felt in the possession of new assets such as land, motorcycle or newly-built modern house or home appliances. In my view, these assets are not disposable but remained as to be transformed into the other capital.

Additionally, migrant families' acquiring membership in social groups and developing networks also are also proved to improve their social positions and change their social practices ultimately. As mentioned earlier, analyzing economic capital which low caste migrant families obtain through the migration alone cannot explain the changing social practices and relations.

In the process, the obtainment of certain capital is given a social meaning and recognition which in turn, is translated into symbolic capital. The factors which determine the symbolic significance of capital are, in my study, defined as savings from remittance, land ownership, membership in community-based social groups or organizations, and other visible assets such as modern house and appliances, motorcycle and etc.

In my study, I also attempted to utilize intersectionality as an analytical tool, pointing out the complexity of social relations and groups. The intersection of gender, caste and ethnicity, and material status of oneself make the (re)configuration of social positions and

practices within a society. In my analysis, two variables, namely caste and ethnicity, are used as interchangeable terms since they work in a similar way in defining social boundaries and meanings in a Nepali setting. To make it simpler, I limit the categories of my interviewees to gender and caste only. Nevertheless, using these two social variables is sufficient to illustrate the complexity of changing social relations and understand the different narratives of the people from the different caste.

I chose a rural village, named Devnagar, in Chitwan district in Nepal, because I have known the area for some years, therefore it was more convenient, logistically, to conduct my research within a month of time. This place was also ideal because this village is comprised of good mix of people from low- and high caste due to the district's resettlement history.

Qualitative methods were used in my study – semi-structured interview and focus group discussion. These research methods enabled me to incorporate some real time changes and analyze better people's stories rather than quantifying them. The interview usually takes half an hour and 39 families were interviewed – 23 families from low caste and 16 from high caste. Two focus group discussions took place, each group comprising of same caste (low or high). The reason why I split the two groups was that it is often true that low caste people would be shy to speak up when high caste people are around.

The findings are presented and analyzed in a categorical way.

First, the changes within household level and attitudes and relationships with neighbours were identified. Many, across the different caste status, took a positive stance about the changes after the migration. Post-migration changes include the migrants' quitting bad habits such as consuming of alcohol and cigarettes and/or

squandering money which have been major social issues in rural Nepal, often linked with the domestic violence. Naturally, the spousal relationships have been told to become more amicable since the migration.

Due to the economic improvement and financial independency which migrant families now enjoy, low caste migrant families have become more confident in communicating with their high caste neighbours and engaging in the same community activities. This changed social practices is attributed to the changes on the social relationships between these caste groups, which were defined, more or less, as dominant – submissive in the past.

The increased membership in the social groups such as saving clubs was found to be interesting, since this saving club is, usually, comprised of female members. Many of low caste women have joined one or multiple saving clubs which was not a popular practice among them in the past. Conversely, the membership of high caste women in this group has not seen a major change, however, a few cases have stood out in a way that their participation have increased post-migration and they have took a leadership role in the club. The increased participation to community development projects or social work have also proved to be a compelling example of improved social positions of low caste group.

As previously mentioned, the acquirement of economic assets should not be overlooked because in this specific setting, these assets have social meanings embedded. The examples are modern concrete slab house, land ownership, possessing certain luxury items or having surplus income as savings. The economic capital has helped low caste families to earn some respect from neighbours, which are looked upon by many migrant aspirants. In other words, this capital also enabled them to acquire and access to other forms of capital.

The landownership is particularly a crucial point in this context. The landless status is often synchronized with the caste status as it reflects the historically entrenched tenant-landlord relationships between the low- and high caste. Moreover, the fact that most of low caste people near the forest area are living in the government-owned land provides them enough motivation to have their own land, pursuing the landownership.

## **2) Way forward**

The examples and narratives of low caste people in my study are the ones who have been improving their living conditions through labour migration. In a context where the low caste group have been socially excluded and denied their rights in the past, these stories have provided some enlightening aspect.

First of all, their increased participation or visibility in the public arena can build a way for upward social mobility in the future. In the past, Dalits were not even allowed to be with the high caste people in the public area. The Hindu temple in Devnagar denied access to the low caste people in the last decade. In this sense, low caste people who gained accessibility to the religious site are now participating in the social work and/or religious activities. Labour migration is not a sole factor for this change, as argued earlier. Nevertheless, a number of low caste people have become involved more actively in the community affairs with increased sense of self-esteem and confidence after migration. This change essentially helps to reconfigure the previous social practices, which were very much defined by caste hierarchy.

In the similar vein, the respect and recognition earned essentially through accumulation of economic capital is seen to have transformed into social capital or symbolic capital. The respect that

migrant families supposedly gained, as it seems, was previously regarded as a certain form of privilege which only high caste people could enjoy in the past. Since the transformation of this capital was possible through economic improvement through labour migration, it can also be said that it is contingent and volatile. The migration policy and global economic situation can largely influence the quota of Nepali labour migrants in the future, the failure of migration and accumulation of assets could provide some possibility to downgrade their social positions.

Having said that, certain level of segregation by caste in the social groups and political arena is also still observable as seen in the examples of saving clubs. There is little bit of overlapping in terms of the caste profile of members, however, in most cases, the saving clubs that high caste women are part of differ from what low caste women joined. This segregation is seen in other practices such as the proximity of residence between low- and high caste families.

Gender aspect to the impact of labour migration provided a different angle into this study since most of interviews and discussions I had were with female members of migrant family. Indeed, since the absence of male family member due to migration, the workload and responsibility have increased for female member – mostly there are wife or mother of respective migrant. Nevertheless, they also started to participate more on community affairs such as participating forest user group meetings and collective social work, and joining saving clubs. It would reflect the increased freedom for the women in rural Nepal in which how they can utilize and maximize their remittance when their male family member is abroad. However, a critical question can be raised that how durable this change is when the labour migration is temporary and circular. In other words, the changed practices for women of migrant family could be transient

and it is questionable that they would help change the entrenched patriarchal practices in the context of rural Nepal, in particular.

The limitation of my study scope also could silence the impacts of the failure of labour migration, due to sickness of migrants or other unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances. If this happens, the successful stories of migrants and their improved social positions would change for worse, if not the same.

Last concern is that the highlighted findings should not be romanticized entirely, since migration makes the family stay apart which make them go through emotional and physical impacts of separation. In particular, the children of labour migrants are mostly affected due to the absence of a parent and this might have psychological effect on their development. However, this was not addressed here because it is not the scope of my study. Having said that, it would be interesting to see the work on silenced and often ignored stories of failed migration and its impacts on migrant families. My research attempted to understand the changing caste relations and impacts on the social mobility of low caste migrant families, especially through the lens of the female members of migrant families who stayed behind. And here I would conclude my study as follows: the trend of increasing outward labour migration from marginalized groups such as *Janajatis* and Dalits tells socioeconomic exclusion of these groups from the domestic job market and the available opportunities, however, it also shows, on the other hand, that economic success and its associated benefits through labour migration would provide them a potential for social upgrade.

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