

THE MARZINALIZED

Foreign labor migration: Changing lives of the Dalits

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Nepal has been exporting labor to the Gulf and some Southeast Asian countries. Every day, over one thousand Nepalis leave the country to work overseas in search of better living for themselves and their beloved ones back home. The labor migrants also includes Dalits, the most socially marginalized and economically deprived section of the Nepali society.

For almost all Dalits, their own state has been discriminatory for years and their non-Dalit fellows are untouchable to them. They can hardly expand their economic activities except their traditional occupations, such as ironwork, tailoring and leatherwork which are menial and polluting jobs for many Nepalis. These occupations, in most cases, haven't transformed their economic and social wellbeing, albeit serving as crucial means for their living.

So what has happened to the social and economic relations that pertain to Dalits following foreign labor migration? We often encounter articles and public debates that concern the size of remittance flow, gender issues and so forth about labor migration. However, there's been little understanding of the effects of migration on Dalits.

Two questions are particularly important here: How migration has improved economic wellbeing of Dalits, and whether it has altered the social relations that have perpetuated untouchability and social exclusion of them?

Surprising economic progress

Here's an example of how working abroad has changed the lives of Dalits in one of the remote villages in the last 15 years: the changes that have occurred in two villages of Ramechhap District with 45 Dalit (Damai) households. About 40 Pariyars from these villages have gone abroad to work. Damais are represented with their surname of Pariyar, as the respondents suggested that the term is more dignified than Damai.

There has been an unexpected change in the economic condition of these Pariyar households. Not many researchers would've predicted this change had they investigated this community 15 years ago. There have been visible changes in their hamlets, indicating their improved wellbeing.

Some families have built new houses with zinc and slate roofing. This is a huge change compared to their housing with thatched roofing prior to migration. Others have repaired their houses to give them new looks. Thus, the whole Pariyar hamlets are being gentrified.

In visible terms, most of them previously used to dress in ragged clothes, and they used cloths donated by their bista (usually upper-caste people). Now they no longer accept used clothes from their bista.

Apart from these changes, perhaps the most notable but somehow expected change is that the former Pariyar are becoming professional tailors with improved occupational and entrepreneurial skills. This means Pariyars were mainly engaged in traditional labor, namely, the Balighare system in which Pariyars provided their occupational services –tailoring for upper-caste households – and they mostly received certain amount of grains in lieu. This system is known as Riti Bhagya system in western Nepal as popularized by Mary Cameron in her famous book, "On the edge of the auspicious: Gender and caste in Nepal." Through this system, they were just able to sustain subsistence living while facing caste-based discrimination.

Following foreign labor migration, most Pariyar migrants, after their return, have given up this traditional Balighare system and have started their own tailoring businesses. Since most Pariyar migrants were employed in garment industries abroad, it provided them with an opportunity to enhance their tailoring skills. Further, apart from learning entrepreneurial skills, they also accumulated some money to invest in their tailoring business back home. Now fifteen Pariyars run their own tailoring businesses in local towns and Kathmandu. They also sell fabric and sew clothes, becoming entrepreneurs. They report that they are making as much money as they used to earn abroad.

Most Dalits in Nepal are landless and even many of Dalit landholders don't own enough land to meet their basic food requirements. Thus, they subsist on their traditional occupation and wage laboring. Some of them are also engaged in sharecropping but mostly they are agricultural laborers in rural areas.

Apart from the Balighare system and playing music, laboring was one of their main sources of living. But very few of them work on land that

belongs to non-Dalits. Out of 45 households, 20 have bought land and cultivate it. Since land remains a key asset for rural livelihood, owning land for the Pariyars could've been a distant dream had they not had a good earning source like migration. Certainly, this has elevated their social status in the village, as reported.

Altering adverse social relations

Dalits in Nepal have been living in disrespect, humiliation and degradation inflicted upon them by the so called upper castes. Untouchability is one of the serious social scourges for Dalits in their everyday life. They experience various forms of discrimination in both private and public spheres, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault. Labor migration has altered many such existing social practices and relations which have resulted in reduced feeling and experience of untouchability for Dalits, as found in the villages.

Firstly, most Pariyar migrants have abandoned the traditional Balighare system and playing music. But almost all Pariyar households continued these occupations until a decade ago. Leaving traditional roles has facilitated them to get rid of the forms of discrimination associated with these activities. Still, Pariyars are admired for both skills – tailoring and music – but the stigma and discriminatory practices embedded have dimmed its importance for them.

Secondly, as explained, Pariyars were also agricultural laborers in the villages. They used to work at others' land as wage laborers while facing the ills of untouchability and exploitation by large landholders. This is no longer the case since very few Pariyars now involve themselves in agricultural laboring.

Thirdly, migrant Pariyars came to know that caste discrimination is against human rights and thus it is unacceptable to the international community. They reported that they feel better treated overseas than in their own country. They could do many things abroad which are socially banned for them due to their castes in their place of origin. So at least for the migrants, they don't feel discriminated against although their family members could be experiencing discrimination at home. Through their transnational experience, they have started to challenge their own belief and understanding. This has helped them to contest any unjust practices by anyone on the basis of caste.

We have collected some stories of confrontation between Dalits and non-Dalits when non-Dalits attempted to dominate Dalits, based on casteist grounds.

Linking to wider debate on globalization

Our aim here is not to claim that labor migration is the best alternative

to traditional occupation for better wellbeing of Dalits. We just explored the general patterns of changes in the social and economic lives of Pariyar Dalits as triggered by labor migration. Labor migration hasn't just increased the volume of remittance to the country but also it has contributed to lift the poor out of poverty and eased the pernicious social relations benefiting the socially excluded – the Pariyars, in this case. This isn't just a question of change in the lives of Pariyar Dalits but an overall question of globalization and its impacts.

Globalization has facilitated the circulation of labor around the world and has had varied impacts, both positive and negative, on different communities. Many believe that the poor and marginalized are further pauperized with globalization. However, globalization has had positive impacts on Pariyar households.

There are some dark sides, too. While migrant Dalits have been able to transform their economic condition and social relations on advantageous terms, it is yet to be seen as to how the future of the children of the migrant Pariyars would look like in the future in terms of their education, occupation and livings standard.

The migrant Pariyars have gained unprecedented exposure to different cultures, knowledge and societies. This transnational experience has helped them rethink and review their own beliefs, thinking and practice. As a result, they have now started to challenge their own beliefs and the dominant discourse and practice along caste lines. These acts will surely contribute to shifting the goalposts of power game in the long run in rural Nepal.

However, the hardships they bore prior to flying overseas, and during their migration cycle and family tensions, mainly on issues of their children, often make this process problematic. These are serious issues which need proper attention of the state to multiply the benefits from international labor migration.

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