



Nepali youth have migrated for work to the Gulf countries and Malaysia at an unprecedented level. Over 1000 Nepali workers leave the country for foreign employment every day. For many, labour migration is not just a means to overcome economic hardships and accumulate wealth, it has increasingly been pursued rather as a way of life and livelihood. Some analysts argue that migration has contributed to saving national economy and improving material well-being of many people. And indeed this is true in a broader sense since it has protected the national economy from being collapse, accounting for the ratio of remittances to GDP some 25 percent. Rural places are being gentrified with rural lives becoming more urbane than before despite some social tensions and contradictions. Many families have been able to send their children to private schools. Thanks to the migrants who have facilitated these outcomes risking their own lives and being away from their families. Among the plethora of migration-triggered changes, a far-reaching change could be the poor and landless migrants purchasing land.

Not to mention, the majority of labour migrants represent the middle class. Nevertheless, many landless and poor people have also been able to go overseas in search of better life for themselves and their family members back home. And notably many more of the poor aspire to do so when their fortunes allow. Those who entered and became successful in foreign employment have invested remittances, at least for housing plot, ghaderi which sounds a key priority when their basic needs are met. As a result, many landless migrants have become landowners across the country. This is, in a way, land redistribution without state intervention which has been made possible through the remittances. This is particularly important in the Nepal's context where many poor are landless or near landless. Land remains a key asset for lives and livings of rural people, particularly for the poor as a basis for escaping impoverishment. Many families now living non-agrarian lives could gain their status working land sometimes in the past. So land may not be a key factor for high level of prosperity but it can certainly act as a basis for upward mobility. In addition, land is important for food security to those who can't afford purchasing foods, and housing to those who cannot rent a room.

Recently some national news dailies have reported that nearly half a million Nepalis put forward their applications to the government to recognise them as the landless. Uncertainty looms large as to whether they will be granted land. However, an issue of land reform has long been generating a considerable political debate in Nepal. Many social and land rights activists may argue that land reform – entailing redistribution, scientific reform, agrarian reform and so forth, is crucial for rural poverty reduction. This may hold an immense importance for the landless but how to make it happen remains an issue. Over the decades of their movements, achievements could be wonderful for the land activists and their donors, but are not realised by the landless in most cases. To facilitate land reform or some would argue as to delay, the successive governments have formed several commissions but the problem has remained largely unresolved. While a state centric approach to land reform holds merit, there are other processes such as migration that have triggered land redistribution without the state coercion. This is phenomenal since it could be a distant dream for the landless buying land amidst skyrocketed

Labour migration and the landless

By Ramesh Sunam

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land prices without being involved in foreign employment. This argument is not to undermine the very need of land reform in Nepal. Rather my concern is to unfold different trajectory to owning land that can be complementary to redistributive form of land reform.

However, it is a herculean task for the landless and the poor to be able to go for foreign employment. The migrants who could transform their social identity from being the landless to the landowning made it amid adverse social and economic context. They have to face a lot of problems – dealing with manpower agents, securing funds for their migration, let alone downstream ones – long hours, nostalgia, language and miserable livings. These issues hit the landless and the poor more than others given their no or weak social capital, low level of education and lack of access to finance, among others. Since they lack collaterals to access funds from the financial institutions, they have to depend on multiple local lenders who normally offer loan with high interest rates, usually not less than 36%. This means loan repayment absorbs most of their foreign earnings, leaving little for families and productive resources. These lived realities demand the support of the state to facilitate migration process so as to make it work for the landless and the poor. But the state has not given adequate attention. Why not to intervene with the banking policies so that the labour and the skills of the landless and the poor are accepted as collaterals. Creating institutions that provide soft loan may also help develop a leveling social field for the poor. Overall, the state needs to be proactive and sensitive in establishing conditions and developing mechanisms for the landless and the poor so that they can enhance returns from labour migration while reducing associated costs.

(The writer is a PhD student at Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University in Canberra. Email: ramesh.sunam@anu.edu.au)

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