

Janak Raj Sapkota. 2016. *Kahar: Vaideśik Rojgārile Bithoḷido Samāj*.
Kathmandu: We Read.

In the discourse of foreign labor migration in Nepal, there has recently been a shift from economic impacts of remittance to human and social cost of migration. The human cost gained prominence with the execution of 12 Nepalis in Iraq in 2004 and the killing of 14 Nepali security guards in Afghanistan in June 2016. Social costs feature prominently as supposed “infidelity of migrants’ wives” and “family disintegration.” However, sensational news rather than full stories are told in newspapers, and more numbers than voices fill research reports. Although now featured in music videos and television shows, such issues of social impacts have not been

discussed in academic works. *Kahar* by Janak Raj Sapkota, a journalist, is a pioneering work of real-life stories on the sufferings of migrants and their families both at home and abroad.

Sapkota argues that not only the recent foreign labor migration as such but also the suffering brought by it, as described in his book, are continuation of the two hundred plus year tradition of *lāhure* migration of the youths from the hills of Nepal. Moreover, as in the Rana period, the state and those in power are complicit in the plight and suffering of current migrants and families. In other words, actors and actions have changed but the roles remain the same, as seen in the binary oppositions mentioned by participants or by the author himself: *lāhure* soldiers vs. Gulf workers, as migrants; *gallāwālā* vs. brokers, as recruiters; chest measurement vs. medical report, as requirements; train vs. airplane, as transport; Butwal vs. Kathmandu, as take-off sites; letter vs. coffin, as deliveries from abroad in the case of dead migrants; pension vs. tension, as outcomes. Such an argument makes Sapkota not only a storyteller but also a researcher, as evident not only by the liberal use of numerical data in the last chapter, but also by additional footnotes with citations in the stories themselves. I consider the book as an outcome of research by an author who happens to be a journalist telling real stories.

The book consists of eight stories, followed by an assessment of related human and social cost in a historical and structural perspective. Death and suffering, of migrants, and destitution and suffering, of family members, feature prominently in these stories: “Feelings, tears, and compassion of many are included in this book” (p. 237). The stories are all of poor, rural people, men and women, who went abroad due to poverty, by taking loans at high interest rates, and were deceived by brokers. The author visited the families within the year 2071 v.s., but some events of death, disability, and missing had occurred some years prior. Each story begins with a brief “pre-story” comparing or contrasting with the main story (e.g., a man’s rescue with “blood money” as a pre-story versus another man’s wait for either capital punishment or acquittal with blood money). This style of presentation shows not only the author’s fund of knowledge but also signifies that such incidents are not exceptions but are common occurrences.

The first story, “Flight No. MH 170,” is about the journey of a dead body from Saudi Arabia (colloquially “Saudi”), from the time it arrives at the airport in Kathmandu to its cremation by the Marsyangdi River below the villege of Deurali in Tanahun district in western Nepal. It gives a rare

insight into the everyday phenomenon of the “delivery” of migrants’ dead bodies to their relatives: “People were looking at us [dragging a coffin at the airport] as if it was a normal occurrence” (p. 7). Moreover, it depicts the everyday working of a driver whose duty is to carry dead bodies in a pick-up van from the airport and deliver them to their homes/families in different parts of Nepal. The author’s participation in the funeral of this coffin-packed body gives convincing evidence of the common saying in rural areas regarding the effect of current migration, namely, that there are no mourners in the village: “I counted the mourners. 18. All old aged except three youths” (p. 23).

Crime and execution abroad feature in two stories. In “Kuśaki Shova,” (Chapter two), Shova is beheaded in public in Saudi for killing the baby she was looking after, while in “Kuśal Maṅgal Chaina,” (Chapter four), Kushal from Syangja kills his supervisor, Irshad from Mahottari, and is waiting for his fate. Sapkota is successful in tracing the causes of such crimes in these two stories, pointing to not only the exploitative working conditions abroad, but also the failure of the Nepali state to safeguard the rights of its citizens working outside of Nepal. The author is also successful in obtaining the letter (printed in the Appendix of the book) written by Shova from the jail to the Nepali Embassy in Saudi Arabia, describing the physical and psychological violence she suffered at the hands of her master – including not being provided food and salary, and later, when she tried to complain, the renewing of her contract at knifepoint – which led to the crime. On the other hand, Kushal killed Irshad on the impulse following a dispute arising from the former’s loss of uniform, and the subsequent withholding of his salary.

The suffering of family members is prominent in both stories. Shova’s father fainted on hearing the news of her execution and needed to be hospitalized in Kathmandu for eight days. Her body could not be received, so *kuśa* grass was cremated symbolizing her body. A complaint against the broker who illegally and fraudulently sent Shova abroad was rejected by the police office. On the other side, Kushal’s family will be receiving false promises of his possible return for the next 15 years until the victim Irshad’s three-year-old daughter reaches the age of 18 and is able to decide the fate of her father’s killer, according to the appellate court verdict on a writ by Kushal.

Women’s migration out of desperation is also depicted in another story, “Sushila Didī” (Chapter three). If Shova’s reason for migration was due to the desperation of being a poor single mother after being abandoned by her

husband, Sushila migrated to support a large family including an unemployed husband. Destinations of both women were similar, illegally through Delhi to Saudi Arabia, but their destiny came to be different: Sushila is missing, probably on her way to Saudi when she went for the second time after staying at home for less than a year following an earlier four-year stint. Sushila's insistence to migrate despite her son's request to the last minute ("Son's tears could not stop the mother's way" [p. 85]), shows her courage arising from the desperation of an illiterate woman, and how migration – of the wife if not (possible) of the husband – is seen as the last resort to come out of poverty.

The two stories in Chapters five and six punctuate the flow and integrity of the book, both in terms of length and substance. The fifth, "Asthir Manharū," is not a single story but a collection of talks on migration with different men – migrants and non-migrants – and a series of observations. In this sense, the chapter itself is *asthir* (unstable). Some observations in the "mini-stories" are important – such as students' "aims" of going to Dubai and Malaysia to meet their parent(s) and seeing their migrant mothers in their dreams. But the main story – although depicting suffering and death, where a man suffers a motor vehicle accident in Qatar and hears the news of his daughter's suicide at home – is very short relative to other stories in the book. This suggests that Sapkota added the mini-stories – in contrast to a pre-story – to elongate the chapter. In the next story, "Mahavirko Gharmā Mahāvīpatti," a man (Bhaju, son of Mahavir) needs to return home from Malaysia after his wife elopes with a relative. Returning home was a great loss for him as he had to pay compensation to his working company. The only resort for his father, then, is to sell a piece of land and send him abroad again. The author describes this elopement as a *mahāvīpatti* (great disaster) for Mahavir. Here the author, like many other fellow journalists, is sensationalizing a case of marital infidelity and choice. Moreover, this story does not seem to be up to par with the other stories reported in the book since elopement does not compare with death and disability and the suffering of the father-in-law (who had to sell his land) does not compare with the destitute and poverty discussed in the other stories. Moreover, Sapkota seems to describe in detail the non-profitability of agriculture just to make a short story long.

The next two stories (Chapters seven and eight) depict the suffering related to disability. "Bhagawān Naiha Sunaiche" shows the relationship between migration and disability. It goes beyond the tragedy of being disabled at workplace abroad and shows how disability drags the whole

family into poverty. It compares the disabled, hemiplegic life of two youths, Salit and Chhotu. Both were similarly paralyzed abroad while sleeping and were hospitalized for few months before returning to Nepal on wheelchairs. Their wheelchairs broke after some time and their families had difficulty paying loans. They did not get compensations from the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund and could not be adequately cared by family. While one feels he “won’t live” (p. 190), another produced a yet one more child. Symbols of migration which Sapkota depicts in many stories (e.g., as found in the advertisements of manpower agencies in hoarding boards and also over FM radios) are accompanied by symbols of the effects of migration on the body: wheelchair of the disabled, and coffin of the dead (in the first story).

The last story, “Kafin Hīḍne Bāṭo,” concerns the fate of a comatose man, Giri Prasad, lying in a hospital in Qatar. The story points to the suffering common to young married women in migrant households. The suffering of Giri Prasad’s wife, Krishna Kumari, is in the form of a dilemma of whether to return him home or not: “Why return him just to see the face?” (p. 215). In this tragedy, like in all others, the gains of remittance are reversed: their son studying in Butwal (probably in a private school) is sent back to the village and enrolled in a public school. He now walks one and a half hours to and from the new school. This story from Baglung, however, is not about death. The reference to coffin seems to come from the pre-story from Ramechhap district discussed earlier in the chapter. Even if the coffin can be related to the death of *lāhure* soldiers, their bodies were rarely returned. So, the title, which means “road along which coffin arrives,” is misleading.

Sapkota’s conclusions are presented in the final chapter. They reinforce many of the current discourse on migration such as doubts about the sustainability of foreign labor migration, drastic lifestyle change due to remittance only as an exception, and need to focus on employment inside the country. Presented in a rhetorical style and the critical tone of a journalist, he concludes that the gains in education and health are “forever negligible compared to the risks and the infinite series of sufferings undertaken by the Nepali youth abroad” and “the joy of remittance cannot cover the cost to the Nepali society for the remittance economy” (p. 230). The author is successful in showing the sufferings of migrants and their families – irrespective of geographical region, ethnicity, caste, or gender – so long as their poverty and tragic events are similar.

Because of the highly emotive nature of the issues concerned, Sapkota wished to present these cases as reported stories, along with his memories, observations, and reflections. The literary style was intended for the mass readers and for general impact. However, it seems that by favoring multiple genres – literature, journalism, and research – and by discussing a diversity of issues, the book, from the researcher’s point of view, seems to have compromised somewhat its integrity and solidity.

Lastly, the stories are full of questions, from questions of children about the whereabouts of their parents, to questions of the author regarding whether migration is the solution to the problems of Nepali society or itself a problem that needs solution. All questions, however, point toward the state and those in power. One cannot disagree with what Sapkota says: “When this infinite series of *duḥkha* will end, common people do not know. Those who have answers are busy cultivating their private dreams” (p. 231).

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