

Book Reviews

Jeevan R. Sharma. 2018. *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

In Nepal the term “labor migrants” has become synonymous with Nepali workers in the Gulf countries and Malaysia. Government policies on migration, though far from adequate, primarily focus on this particular constituency. Migration-related programs of NGOs and international agencies are often targeted at these workers. Media coverage on migration largely revolves around Nepalis working in Malaysia or one of the Gulf countries. Both civic and state discourse generally ignores the fact that a large number of Nepalis have long been traveling to the country next door for work. In fact, for many Nepalis, going to India still remains the only livelihood option. Jeevan Sharma’s book *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal* is an instructive reminder of this widespread but under-documented phenomenon. Based on fieldwork conducted in western Nepal (mainly Palpa district) and Mumbai between 2004 and 2013, the book offers a multilayered perspective on migration of Nepali men to India.

Nepali labor migration to India dates back centuries. Nepalis have been traveling across the border to work in the army, in tea plantations, hotels, private homes and other sectors. Although Nepali migrants in the Gulf countries and Southeast Asia have now outnumbered those in India, an estimated one million Nepalis still work in India on a long-term or seasonal basis. Of them, approximately ninety percent are men. The porous Indo-Nepal border and the fact that many Nepali migrants to India work in “invisible” spaces like private homes and restaurant kitchens, however, make it challenging to capture the true scale of the migration.

Despite its longstanding significance in people’s lives and in the Nepali state building process, migration did not find a prominent place in early accounts of Nepal produced by Western travelers and colonial officers. With a few exceptions, even Western anthropologists who studied Nepal’s hill ethnic groups often portrayed these groups as fixed, coherent entities, and treated migration as a subsidiary activity. Sharma suggests that such accounts

reflect the “sedentary bias” of classical anthropology where “places and roots” get priority over “mobile states of existence and forms of identity” (p. 55). A similar view was prevalent among international organizations working in Nepal. The portrayal of Nepal as a quintessentially peasant society downplayed the importance of mobility for a long time. This discourse has certainly evolved in recent times. Both anthropological and developmental debates now recognize migration as a fundamental aspect of people’s lives.

In Sharma’s view, migration is not an isolated phenomenon triggered by simple “push” and “pull” factors. Economic factors notwithstanding, historical, social (especially gender) and psychological dimensions all play an important role in men’s decisions to migrate. The early sections of the book provide an overview of the history of migration from the hills, changing rural economy, differing attitudes to migration among different ethnic communities, and literary/cultural representations of migration in Nepal. Sharma aptly summarizes the socioeconomic changes in western Nepal. He presents the expanding roads and market, increased mobility of people, media access and the growth of non-farm livelihood options as interconnected processes that are closely linked to migration. This section also contains interesting insights about the local history of Palpa. For example, we learn that eleven Magar-dominated village panchayats of Palpa were merged with Nawalparasi in 1975 so that the high-caste groups could defeat Magar candidates in the National Assembly election.

A central argument of the book is that men migrate not only to earn and provide for their families, but also to fulfill their prescribed gender roles. Society expects men to earn a living, go out into the world and gather knowledge and experiences that can attest to their “manhood.” It is precisely to fulfill such expectations that many young Nepali men from low-income families in western Nepal migrate to cities in India, where they work as security guards, domestic workers, waiters and cooks. However, for these men the path towards achieving manhood is filled with contradictions, as Sharma vividly demonstrates throughout the book.

The disconnect between reality and aspirations of manliness begins even before they cross the border to India. Sharma, traveling with three men from Palpa to Mumbai, provides first-hand observations of their experience at the Nepal-India border. We witness the excruciating process these men are subjected to at the border. The police and anti-trafficking activists mercilessly grill them on the Nepal side of the border, and once they cross over to India,

they face another round of harassment, intimidation and extortion at the hands of the Indian police, immigration officials and transport operators. One of Sharma's informants is strip-searched for cash by the Indian police.

Herein lies the paradox of the "open border." Though the open Indo-Nepal border on principle embodies freedom of movement and equal treatment of citizens, in practice, Nepali migrants, especially those from poor families, experience a loss of freedom and discrimination at the border. As Sharma writes, "the very act of crossing the border plays a key role in disciplining young Nepali men and turning them into docile migrants" (p. 101). Their experience at the border exposes their vulnerability rather than enabling them to assert their "manliness."

After making the arduous overland journey to India with Nepali migrants, Sharma lived with four Nepali workers in a shared room in Mumbai. This enabled Sharma to provide thick descriptions of Nepali migrants' struggles in Mumbai. Nepali workers in India occupy an "ambiguous political position" (p. 119) whereby they are treated as neither citizens nor foreigners. They have no channels to demand rights. Many of them work for prominent companies or wealthy households but live in slum housing without basic amenities like water and sanitation. Some who work as security guards live in a dingy storage spaces in their employers' houses. Still, security jobs are relatively less strenuous and pay better than other menial jobs and therefore highly coveted. Some think that the advent of multinational security agencies such as Group Four has made it increasingly difficult for Nepalis to get security guard jobs, previously found through personal networks. But others believe that security agencies prefer Nepalis because of their reputation for "bravery" and "loyalty," which illustrates the enduring legacy of the colonial narrative. Sharma cites an example of a Bahun man adopting "Bahadur" surname hoping to improve his chances of getting a security guard job. However, Bahuns have stronger chances of being hired as household helpers given the persistence of caste among the Indian middle class.

Consumption is an integral part of migrant life in Mumbai. Workers cannot fulfill their aspirations of manhood through their jobs, which involve "unmanly" activities like cooking, cleaning, washing dishes and guarding people's homes, and enduring various forms of humiliation. Consumption allows them to "offset the negative effects of menial jobs and to protect their masculine pride" (p. 152). Sightseeing, watching Bollywood films, owning a TV and a mobile phone, splurging on beer and meat, and frequenting

“beer bars” where women serve drinks and perform erotic dances enable young men to partake in capitalist modernity and perform their masculinity. Sharma argues that the opportunity to engage in such activities is precisely what motivates many young men to travel to Mumbai despite exploitative working conditions. In the process of becoming migrant workers, Nepali men from villages also become urban consumers: it is an important part of their transformation.

The final chapter offers a critique of the public health discourse on migrant workers. Whereas the 1990s anti-trafficking discourse projected female migrant workers as HIV carriers, at the turn of the millennium the focus shifted towards male labor migrants in far-western Nepal. Sharma is sharply critical of organizations that place overriding emphasis on HIV and STIs at the expense of migrants’ overall health and well-being. He describes how NGOs and international agencies depicted migrant workers as carriers of sexual diseases and made them into an “object of intervention” (p. 140) without taking their social and economic realities into account.

While much of the book is empirically rich and analytically nuanced, sections that try to draw theoretical conclusions seem less satisfying. For example, the concepts Sharma introduces at the beginning (in particular the “livelihoods” framework) and his critique of traditional studies on migration lack the logical coherence of his analysis of migrant lives. Certain observations, such as the point about the shortage of labor in the hills, or about the politicized identities of marginal groups, seem a bit repetitive.

Despite minor shortcomings, the book sheds valuable light on a section of the population that is now off the radar of government policy and public debate. Through a detailed and insightful portrait of Nepali workers in India, the book broadens our understanding of labor migration and why so many Nepali men leave their villages year after year.

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