

Untold Truth of Foreign Labour Migration and Increasing Aspiration within Youth in Nepal

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The dramatic incensement in mobility indicates that youth are the most mobile population who migrate globally for various purposes. The youth in Nepal are not exceptional as hundreds of thousand youth migrate for foreign employment especially in different Gulf countries and Malaysia every year. Although the causes of youth mobility in Nepal vividly explored, there is common understanding among the scholars about the long established youth culture of foreign migration for employment. The foreign employment has significant contribution in national gross domestic product however the youth who are the economic contributors experience various vulnerabilities and even lose their life while they are abroad. Regardless of difficulties in the foreign land, youth often glorify their experiences and inspire many others aspirants. In this context, this study explores experiences of foreign migrant workers and their perception about abroad work. Case studies were conducted amongst new aspirants and returnees who want to repeat foreign employment. This study reveals that youth, generally, prefer to glorify their abroad work experience rather than telling the truth. The migrant workers secure their position as a successor in the community by doing so. However, the overvalued experiences help aspire new one who see solution only in abroad for an illusionary successful life.

Keywords: youth mobility, foreign employment, aspirations, telling the truth

Introduction

In the recent decades, youths have been most mobile population globally. The international migrants worldwide reached to 244 million in 2015, up from 173 million in 2000 (UN, 2016). More specifically, recent year, one person out of 30 people in the world migrates. Nepal is not exceptional, as the report of (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011) revealed that seven percent of total population of the country was absence that was only three percent in 2001. More recently, the trend has surged that about 1,500 Nepalese workers on average fly out from Kathmandu Airport to Gulf countries and Malaysia every day (Ministry of Labour and Employment [MOLE], 2018). The trend of dramatic incensement in the labour migration shows that the attraction toward foreign employment is increasing among the Nepali youth every year.

Nepal has long history of migration and it has been analyzed from different perspectives by different scholars (Macfarlane, 1976; Gurung, 1987; Subedi, 1993; Gill, 2003; Bhadra, 2007; Sijapati, 2015). However, among the scholars, three major ideas are dominant. The first group claims that migration in Nepal is inherently related with livelihood of the people (Macfarlane, 1976; Gill, 2003). The second group of scholars defined migration structurally and interpreted migration in Nepal as continuous process (Gurung, 1987; Subedi, 1993).

More recently, the third group of scholars (Bhadra, 2007; Sijapati, 2015) defines the migration relating to the empowerment of marginalized group in the society especially of women.

Nevertheless, there are common views on the beginning of migration in Nepal. The trans-Himalayan trade between India, Nepal, Tibet, and China; the origins of which can be traced as far back as 500 BC, is identified as the earliest form of migration to and from Nepal (Kansakar, 1984). Interesting historical fact to note was that there were more Nepalese in Tibet than anywhere else outside Nepal, and a good number of people of Tibetan origin were living in Nepal (Bista, 1980). However, the nature of migration was very informal and the state had no formal system of tracing the mobility. In this sense, the formal migration of Nepalese out of the country is generally associated with recruitment of young Nepali males into the British army since 1990. But the free movement of people with Nepal-India friendship again informalized the mobility. India became the destination for Nepali youth finding seasonal jobs in the different areas of the countries almost for two decades. Moreover, after the establishment of democracy in the country in 1990, a couple of important factors were witnessed to foster youth migration globally and especially from Nepal. First was that Nepal attempted to expand its friendly relation with other countries in the world. Some countries, i.e., countries lies in the Gulf areas and countries, i.e., Malaysia in the East Asia initiated some ambitious infrastructural projects opening up the options for unskilled labour forces in the global south to join their project as labours. That is how Gulf countries and Malaysia became new destinations for Nepali youths. Currently, 86 percent Nepalese male and female labour migrants go Malaysia and Gulf countries for work (MOLE, 2018).

It is true that labour migration has contributed significantly in the country as it shares 29 percent of gross domestic product (Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB], 2015). Furthermore, around 56 percent of the household receive remittance (The World Bank, 2016 as cited in Sharma, 2017). In this regard, the fact of youth migration is often associated with the “rational solution” (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2017) of Nepalese youth for accessing better income with better job comparing to their place of origin. However, it also cannot be denied that the labour migration is embedded with many challenges in spite of many provisions implemented in Nepal. The Foreign Employment Policy (FEP) in 2012 envisions the safe and successful migration regulating private agencies and individuals. It provisions to provide services for foreign migrant workers for their safe and decent work aboard as well as materialize the abroad migration as an opportunity (MOLE, 2018). Nevertheless, a report says around 6,000 Nepalese youths lost their life and 817 are physically disabled in between the fiscal year 2008/2009 and 2016/2017 (MOLE, 2018). Additionally, even those who do not experience any such of physical difficulties go through various psychological vulnerabilities (Bhattra, 2005) related with race, gender, ethnicity, class, and nationality and are subjected to be discriminated. In spite of such bitter fact of abroad labour migration, it is interesting to see that every youth at the local level carries the idea that he/she has to go abroad, and that is where the solutions are. In this context, this study was conducted to explore the reasons for surging labour migration in the country.

Given the background, this study attempts to understand the reasons behind the existing strong aspirations within the unskilled youths to go abroad even if the working environment and earning in the destinations is not fundamentally different than in Nepal. While doing so, we tried to explore whether youths working abroad share their real experience as a migrant labour that is why aspiration continues within left behind youth along with the rosy pictures of migrant labours or they are aspirants who do not believe the truth shared by migrants based on their own experiences abroad.

The study followed qualitative approach employing subjective perception and explored the reality through experiences, background, and views of the participants. We believed that the reality about youth mobility in Nepal is multiple and subjective as well (Castellan, 2010). It can be explored interacting with the youth who are experiencing labour migration. Furthermore, among many qualitative research methodologies, e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, etc. discussed by Creswell (2014), the study followed the case study as a research method. The case study method helped us to observe and perceive the action, interest, and behavior of research participants in real natural setting (Stake, 2005). However, selecting the case is a challenging process (Boxter & Jack, 2008) since it is impossible to study everyone, everywhere, and everything as a case. According to Njie and Asimiran (2014), an individual, unit, or institution can be a case for the study. So, youth migrants who have been experiencing labour migration abroad, and those aspirant youths who are waiting for opportunity to go abroad for labour migration are cases in the study. The participants were selected purposefully to ensure the intended participants.

According to Merriam (1998), researchers in the case study can collect data from both primary and secondary sources. In this regard, the secondary data are collected from reports, newspapers, journals, websites, and so on. In the contrary, for the primary data, we interacted with participants with informal interview setting. For this, we visited office of labour and employment where many youth across the country issue their work permit for abroad work. This setting helped us to provide opportunity to observe participants' behavior and actions. In the beginning, we requested our research participants for their voluntarily participation. Before an interview, we built trust and established rapport and granted their consent to record the conversation in diary and in electronic device. Soon after the interview, we employed the systematic process of coding, categorizing, and thematizing to analyze the qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Finally, the meanings were generated from the collected information. The findings of the study are discussed in the following sections:

Youth Mobility: A Global as Well as Local (Nepali) Phenomenon

Youth are the change agents (Yang, 2014) of political, economical, social, and cultural transformation of a nation. They are also considered to be the major source of nation building (Ministry of Youth and Sports [MOYS], 2015). Thus, the country needs to pay attention towards the development of the youths in order to bring their competence in the mainstream of national development. The growing rate of youth migration in the recent years shows Nepalese youth seeking better opportunities abroad. Consequently, avoiding the adversities in their place of origin has been established as a "youth culture" (Bucholtz, 2002) among Nepalese youths. It is the emerging culture, especially created by young people, seeking alternative systems (Becker, 1963 as cited in Bucholtz, 2002). The culture is dominantly influenced by position as a result of materials as well as positioning (Hall & Jefferson, 1993) social status in the society. More specifically, youth as an agent negotiates with the community structure and tries to secure position accordingly. Doing so, on the one hand, a youth wish to migrate for self positioning game to excel oneself with earned capitals (Bourdieu, 1985), on the other hand, loses the capacity and faces discrimination if they failed to gain power (Giddens, 1984). So, youth mobility can be interpreted as struggle of youth as a migrant toward the achievement of expectations in life. Although it is not sure that youth as a migrant will achieve the expectations, it is sure that nation will lose the important asset for the development in long run.

In the present context, youth mobility is established as a common phenomenon in the world. Nearly one in five of the world foreign-born population resides in established global gateway cities, such as Sydney, London,

and New York (Çağlar, 2014 as cited in IOM, 2015). Nepal also witnessed dramatic increment in youth migration for the foreign employment especially in the last one decade. Over three million Nepalese (approximately 10 percent of the total population and 22 percent of the workforce) work as migrants around the world (Sharma, 2017). There are numerous causes (social, political, and economic) influencing youth for foreign employment. The report of United Nation (2016) showed that almost 40.3 percent of the youth population face the employment oriented problems as well as lack education, good health, and friendly investment ecology in their home community as a result they tend to seek better option in the foreign land. The house hold survey of (CBS, 2011) found that the major cause for absent population in the country was for employment opportunity.

A study conducted by Sharma, Pandey, Pathak, and Sijapati (2014) found that the reason for female migrants was a dependent for male worker compared to any employment opportunity. So, it can be concluded that there are various reasons for influencing youth mobility, but the economic reason is dominant. Similarly, Gautam (2005) stated that the migration in Nepal is a result of complex mechanism related to social, political, and economic reasons. He further claims that migration is influenced by existing socio-economic and political conditions of a country. Many people who are unable to fulfill their needs in the country find the foreign place as their alternatives. In this context, Shrestha (2007) also argued that the youth migration is the impact of globalization. The scholar believes that along with free trade in the world, Nepalese youth also started to find employment opportunity globally. They seem to have used the skill abroad and earned significant amount of money to support their family of home country. This practice has contributed national economy as well (Shrestha, 2007). In this sense, a migrant worker not only supports the family but also contributes the national economy.

Normally, along with transition into adulthood, youth are more likely to “vote with their feet” seeking their mobility (Buchmann, 1989). They are mobile despite the fact that they always remain as the chief heritage of the nation due to courage, creativity, learning competence, and high degree of self-confidence which is also considered to be the major source of nation building (Yang, 2014). Although youth mobility can be one of the alternatives to solve problems, such as poverty and utilize it generating capital by investing in education and other basic needs, it can make the country dependent in long run. Additionally, the situation of youth mobility creates the problems in the long run resulting a shortage of necessary manpower for development activities of the nation, including negative socio-economic impacts (Gautam, 2005). In this sense, youth mobility in Nepal can be viewed from both opportunity and challenges. In the one hand, the mobility has created an opportunity for youth to earn and learn the skill globally; however, on the other hand, country may face long run crisis as the dependency of gross domestic product (GDP) increases in to the foreign land. So, there always remains a danger that dramatic trend of youth migration will push the country into further economic and social problems.

However, in Nepal, there are multiple attempts have been made in policy level to make labour migration systematic and sustainable. The main formal policy that has envisioned successful migration in the context of Nepal is *Foreign Employment Act (FEA)* in 2007 which has been revised according to changing context. Nevertheless, the first effort was made to formalize it nationally in 1985 with the *Foreign Employment Act*. The main objective of the Act was to formalize outflow of labor migration in other countries other than India. However, the changing national and global context inspired the government of Nepal to amend the act in 1998. Similarly, the National Labour Policy (NLP) formulated in 1999 further guided for strong provision and mechanisms facilitating migrant workers. In recent decades, the government adapted the regulation of foreign

labour migrants in line with the international standards and collaborated with international agencies to identify the issues related to exploitive practices in recruitment and employment. The formulated Foreign Employment Policy (FEP) in 2012 more clearly provisioned the formal system for foreign labour migration. In this regard, it can be said that Nepal has prioritized the policy of formal labour migration to make it systematic and efficient.

Aspirant Youth Perceive Migration as Solution

The rapidly growing trend of labour migration shows that foreign employment has been established as an attraction for Nepali youth. The Department of Foreign Employment had issued 382,871 work permits in the fiscal year 2016/2017 which slightly decreased by 5.15 percent compared to previous fiscal year 2015/2016 (MOLE, 2018). It has been a very difficult task to understand why every youth in the developing country like Nepal want to go abroad to achieve their expectations and that is where they believe riddle of successful life is. In this context, Shrestha (2007) argued that the avenue for job aspirants opened in the foreign land after the restoration of democracy with enactment of *Foreign Employment Act* in 1985 which arranged the formal system of foreign employment to the potential migrant workers in Gulf countries. Further, Gautam (2005) added many youth who are unable to fulfill their expectations with the existing environment of their home community and find it convenient to emigrate rather than struggling with hope in the future.

In the study, participants having diverse economic background (business, government employee, agriculture, etc.) expressed common interest of economic achievement. Although economic background communicated by the participants was normal, their level of expectation was high. They were found choosing foreign employment as a better alternative compared to current earning. Interesting to note that job aspirants for foreign employment are mostly inspired by their family and friends. Chiran, one of the participants in the study, who has completed his higher secondary education, shares that,

I started to feel economic pressure after my first child is born. I could not ask money with my old parents because they have not any economic source than agriculture. I tried with poultry form and started my business but could not make any difference. I often faced difficulties since agricultural product is only sufficient for family food. I consulted with parents and they were eager to send me as well. I want to collect some money and start poultry form again in large scale.

In the case of Chiran, he did not care about the earning until the first baby was born. He was living in the joint family where he felt no such pressure for earning since his parents were there to fulfill his needs. But the moment he thought of his independent life, he realized the scarcity of job in his community. He tried with few alternatives but could not fulfill the expectations in the short time of period unlike his friends who successful stories of earning were often shared to him. As a result, Chiran was convinced that working in own place is just for suffering. He was tempted with the only stories of success and decided to go abroad to achieve the expectation.

In the similar context, another participant of the study Miya, a bachelor student, says:

I was thinking of continuing my study and admitted in campus as well. My few classmates went abroad when we were in plus two, now they have returned with big mobile and laptop. I have nothing such. I felt really frustrated not having those things. There is no guarantee, I will get job after bachelor and will have similar lifestyle. Although my parents are against my decision, I want to go and fulfill my expectation in time.

In fact, Miya was good at his study but was not convinced that he would get the decent job after completion of university degree. He shared that he could not be sure that he will earn as per his expectation

since there were many youth who went abroad after completing their university degree. They were unable to access any desirable job and Miya had also fear of the similar situation in his life. He thought foreign employment would be possible alternative to avoid such a frustrating situation after the study. Finally, he decided to go abroad dropping his education and the decision was against his parents.

However, Keshav who is a good earner in his community has the similar perception to those who are jobless in the society. He earns well but is not satisfied and sees miracle in foreign employment. In the interaction, he shared:

I am an electrician in my village. I am busy in my village. My family is easily running with my earning. But I need to think of my future, I want saving for my future generation. I can earn big amount of money within few years in foreign country which will take me earn many years here. I will stay few years and will return and start business in the city.

The sharing of the participants shows that youth are highly optimistic with their abroad migration. When they were asked what if their abroad expectation went wrong, none of the participants is prepared for it. It indicates that they have not thought of any alternatives and are ignorance about the formal process they will adopt to mitigate the adverse situations. In this context, Bikash, one of the aspirants for foreign job told that he would contact his agent who is sending him abroad. However, he was not sure whether the agent would really co-operate him. Similarly, the information they have received about the work in abroad is heavily based on personal communication which might be subjective in many cases. The bad incident which are regularly occurring abroad within migrant labours have been known to them but they have neither bothered it seriously nor aware about its legal process if it becomes their own case in the future. In this regard, the vulnerability of migrant worker is seemingly high when they first time go for the abroad work.

Youth Normally Do not Share “Truth” of Their Abroad Experience

The foreign employment is directly linked with the economic remittance which migrant workers send to support their family. Shrestha (2007) argued that at a time when the national major economic indicators are not favorable, the remittances have contributed in maintaining macro-economic stability. He further claimed that the remittances sent home by migrant workers is supportive to livelihood of their family and has become source of fulfilling their expectations. In the similar line, Sijapati and Limbu (2012) also saw contribution of foreign employment opportunity especially for women. They further argued that Nepali society is strongly structured with male domination. Normally, female access to outer field is rejected, weakening their existence of equal opportunities. However, in the transforming social structure, migration has played vital role to rescue the female from household boundaries.

In the contrary, Bhattarai (2005) argued that behind the economical remittance there are many stories which are unfavourable to migrant workers. He further argued that many of the youth who are the economic contributors of the country go through vulnerabilities and even lose their life in foreign land. The vulnerabilities are not only death but also discrimination in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. their social, psychological, and physical security is less prioritized. Their living standard is below the average of others living in same countries. Illegal entry deceiving from Manpower Company is another myth of such vulnerabilities.

This study participants also shared their bitter experiences (personal, social, job, etc.) in the journey of foreign employment. However, they revealed that a migrant never prefers to share the bitter experience in the

society. They feel it as a possible threat in their social capital which they struggle to achieve it as power (Bourdieu, 1985). During the interaction, participants shared that most of the migrant workers hardly tell about their real situation to their family as well. Dinesh who returned from Qatar recently shares:

I used to work as a painter in the big building. Buildings are not like this we see here. There are big building and really risk to hang oneself on the wall while painting. However, I shared that my work as painter is an easy job. If I had shared the truth, my family might be living in tension back home.

Dinesh is aware that many of his friends have the similar working situation; however, they never share such adversities to their family and relatives. In this sense, he also assumed that hiding the reality was the alternative to save his face in his surroundings.

Similarly, Kamal who was in the process to repeat his foreign employment, states:

I was arrested in Saudi Arabia since police suspected me for wrong work. Though I was innocent, I was put in jail for 10 days and only given drinking water and terrible food which was often cold. I was put completely in isolated without letting me to contact to my family. It was unexpected and even I did not know why I was imprisoned for. It was really torturous. However, I only shared the incident to my wife and we never shared it to others including my parents fearing the unnecessary gossiping in the village.

The incident experienced by Kamal was unexpected to him however not the new. According to him, many such cases are common in the abroad but nobody prefers to share the incident. He was also not told about the legal process when one goes with the adversities before experiencing the own case. Anshar, one of the returnees also shared his terrible life when he first went abroad in similar way:

I used to weep every night almost for first four months while I was alone. I was given a dark room for staying even if the weather was terrible hot. Neither there was a good bed, nor window for air circulation, nor any cooling system. Later with the help of friends I changed the work and got a bit relief. However, I never told the situation I faced there to anyone, including my wife and family. Whenever I had to talk with my family in phone, I tried to avoid about the situation I had been facing abroad and focused only asking about village and family.

Another respondent Mr. Sunder who was one of the returnees claimed that he shared about his work to everyone if he was asked. "My work was quite easy. I was lucky to get such easy work since my father in law was there and he helped me to find the job. I often shared my workplace in face book as well". However, he accepted that many of his friends do not want to share about their work if it is though. The discussion mentioned above concludes that migrants opt to share information the reality is positive and encouraging, but they avoid doing so if they faced bitter and difficult situation abroad.

A study by Nurchayati (2011) found that the migrant workers were able to adapt an alien environment, overcame problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers. It was possible when they already were aware about the possible difficulties they may face at work place shared by their fellow workers. In the contrary, this study explored that Nepali migrant worker normally do not share the difficulties they experienced in the foreign land rather they prefer to glorify their stay with their colleagues. Consequently, new aspirant worker go through multiple vulnerabilities when he/she goes abroad for the first time. Durga, a returnee migrant worker, shared:

I had different imagination about the abroad since I often used to see my friends' photo in the face book, big cities and facilities but it was very different when I went there. Abroad is not dream land as people talk about but it is possible land since if you are lucky to get good job you will have better earning but it does not go with everyone. I was offered

attractive salaries before going there but given less than half saying I was inexperienced. I waited for four month for hoping to increase it since it was not sufficient for my food as well. My field supervisor started threatening me rather than increasing salary after four months. I was helpless and returned back to the country.

Hari who returned after three years from United Arab Emirates (UAE) wants to repeat his migration again. He believes that now he is experienced about the work environment abroad and is prepared for any difficulties arise. He also shared his bitter experience of his first time, and stated:

I had dream of working abroad since my childhood. My uncle was in Saudi and I often used to see his photo driving big lorries in big city and wished to get such life. I got the similar work when I went there but I was not told about the climate and shelter I have to live. It was so hot beyond my expectation and no social like. First few months I was really frustrated but latter habituated and waited for finishing my contract time.

In this sense, going abroad has been established as a culture among the Nepali youth. Hari further added, “They will not listen us even we tell them not to go”. The growing rate of youth migration also justifies Hari that Nepalese youth tend to seek better opportunities abroad. Despite the various adversities, it is glorified in such a way that every youth in the villages dreams for abroad work and it has been established as “youth culture” (Bucholtz, 2002). The culture is dominantly influenced by position as a result of materials as well as positioning (Hall & Jefferson, 1993) and social status in the society.

In this regard, telling the truth is necessary to unveil the reality of foreign employment since truth about real experience of abroad work is mostly hidden and glorified the abroad stay making foreign employment as a dream for remaining others. It seems that most of the problem Nepali youths are facing as foreign labour migrants begins only due to the fact that they were not properly communicated the real scenario in the working places abroad. To address the problem, Nepal has come up with a pre-departure orientation training as a pre-requisite for all migrants planning to go abroad. They all require to obtain the orientation for 11 hours for men and 13.5 hours for women from a government approved institution at a standardized rate. However, none of the 51 Returnee Nepali migrants interviewed for a research done by The Asia Foundation (2013) received any pre-departure orientation trainings. The same study states that most migrants, on the one hand, felt that it was necessary to seek information about the country of destination before leaving. Contrary to this, at the time of departure, none of the migrants tried to obtain information on pre-departure trainings of any kind. Amnesty International (2011) came up with a conclusion that aspirant migrants, in most cases, are left in the dark about their employment conditions, often until just hours before their departure when they are handed their contract at the airport. The Asia Foundation (2013) illustrated that 52 percent of Nepali aspirant migrants had not received any information about the prospective employer in the destination country before migration. Of the respondents who had prior knowledge, only four percent were effectively able to make inquiries about the prospective employer, whereas the rest did not cross verify at all. In most cases, there is deliberate ambiguity in communication between the recruitment agency or agent and the aspirant migrant that prevents the migrant from informing himself about the job he/she may eventually agree to perform. Some migrants have reported that they did not dare to ask the agent about the prospective employer or the details of the job for fear of jeopardizing their migration process (The Asia Foundation, 2013).

Conclusion

There is debate among the scholars defining the contribution of foreign migration. Role of foreign employment cannot be ignored since it supports the GDP significantly. Furthermore, it has provided

opportunities to aspirant workers utilize their skill globally and earn as well as learn from there for their prosperous life. Dramatic incensement in youth migration in recent years proves that youth mobility is established as a youth culture in Nepali society as every youth in the community possess the idea of going abroad and where they find the solution of life. The unfavorable situation, family pressure, and peer pressure are some of the major causes of foreign employment; however, almost every migrant expect for economic gain. The migrant workers mostly develop knowledge about work place based on personal communication which is mostly beyond the reality. The migrant workers often glorify their journey, although they go through serious problem. This is because they want to earn social capital along with their investment and engagement in migration. Undoubtedly, many new aspirants become victim of a good desire just because they are not told the truth by those experienced migrant workers. The evidences shows the migrant workers can adapt an alien environment, overcame problems in the workplace, and negotiated with their employers if they get prepared for all probable problems to be faced in the destination. Hence, there is necessary of rational strategy at national level for revealing the truth about the migrants' experience to unveil the reality in new aspirants. This will not only promote true democratic essence of telling the reality but also help thousands of new aspirant migrant workers be prepared for foreign employment practically.

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