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► **To cite this version:**

Tristan Bruslé. Choosing a Destination and Work: Migration Strategies of Nepalese Workers in Uttarakhand, Northern India. Mountain Research and Development, 2008, 28 (3/4), pp.240-247. 10.1659/mrd.0934 . halshs-01694741

**HAL Id: halshs-01694741**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01694741>**

Submitted on 3 Feb 2018

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Author(s): Tristan Bruslé

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 28(3):240-247.

Published By: International Mountain Society

<https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.0934>

URL: <http://www.bioone.org/doi/full/10.1659/mrd.0934>

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Tristan Bruslé

# Choosing a Destination and Work

## Migration Strategies of Nepalese Workers in Uttarakhand, Northern India

*In far-western and mid-western Nepal, where food shortages are prevalent, migration to India for work purposes has been a common livelihood strategy for a large part of rural households for at least two or three generations.*

*In this paper, the focus is on male migrants who are part-time peasants in Nepal and part-time workers in Uttarakhand, northern India. Strategies to choose both a destination and work are studied in order to understand the spatial dimensions of migration. Factors such as the availability of work, networks, proximity, and concepts about space influence the choice of a destination made by migrants, who have to find a balance between constraints and ambitions.*

**Keywords:** Livelihood strategy; temporary migration; migration strategy; destination choice; Himalayas; Nepal; India.

**Peer-reviewed:** October 2007 **Accepted:** June 2008

### Background and conceptual framework

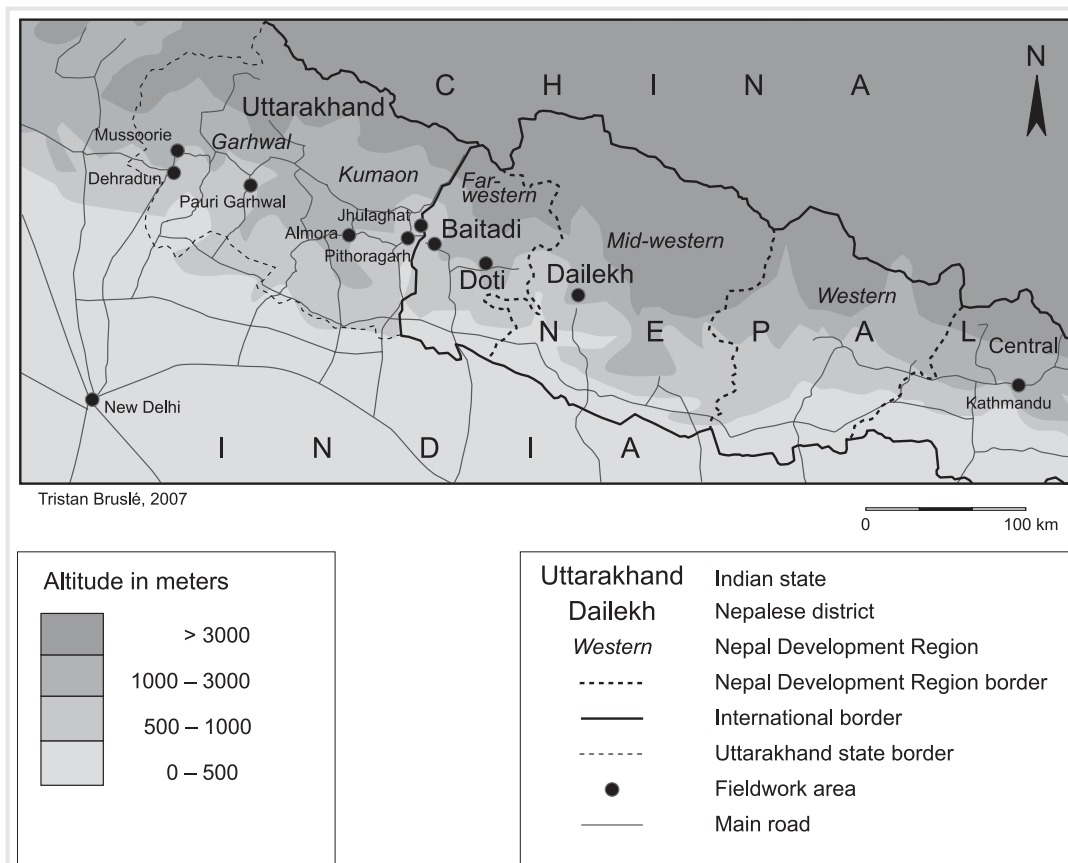
Since the 1990s and the boom in international migration from Nepal, labor migration has been the focus of many studies (Seddon et al 2001; Von der Heide and Hoffman 2001; CBS 2004; Thieme and Müller-Böker 2004; Wyss 2004; Kaspar 2005; Thieme and Wyss 2005; Thieme et al 2005; Kollmair et al 2006; Thieme 2006). In the meantime, Nepalese migrants' official remittances have increased to represent 16.8% of total GDP in 2005–2006 (NRB 2007), whereas, if unofficial streams of money were also taken into account, their share might rise to 25% of GDP (Shrestha 2007). According to the 2001 Nepal census, more than 77% of absentees are to be found in India. The issue of temporary labor migration from mid-western and far-western regions to the Himalayan Indian state of Uttarakhand is addressed in this paper, with particular focus on the choice of destination and work in India. From these parts of Nepal, almost all migrants (99% from far-western region, 95% from mid-western region) choose India as their destination (see also CBS 2001; Bruslé 2006, 2007), and almost all are male.

From 2001 to 2003, fieldwork was done both in Nepal and in India, ie in the source and receiving regions, in order to have a complete view of the migration phenomenon and thus to be able to understand its

complexity. In 2001, Dullu (Dailekh district) and villages in Doti district were chosen because of their high rates of temporary migration. In 2002 and 2003, the Maoist insurgency forced the author out of Nepal. It was decided that migration patterns would be studied by meeting migrants in their place of work in Uttarakhand towns and in New Delhi. The results discussed here are based on a literature review and on interviews conducted in the Nepali language with male migrants, non-migrants, and also with Indian contractors and restaurant owners who provide the Nepalese with work. Family members of migrants were mainly interviewed in the source region and less often in India where most men from the far-western region migrate alone. This qualitative study does not claim to be representative. However, the migrants interviewed were selected according to the relevance of their job, their age, and their achievements. Apart from formal interviews, informal meetings with migrants at their place of work or in their room provided a deeper understanding of their life. A large part of this paper is based on observations made in both private and public spaces. Ninety-four in-depth interviews with high and low caste male migrants were conducted in Nepal (Dailekh and Doti districts), in Uttarakhand, and in New Delhi (Figure 1).

Nepalese migrants correspond to an ideal type of transmigrant in that they “are characterized by the fact that their work, housing and life trajectories (and times horizon) span between different locales in multi-local transnational social spaces” (Pries 2001). Nepalese transnational social spaces between Nepal and India are nothing new because labor migration has been deeply entrenched for generations in the lives of Nepalese from the far-western region, and for many of them, it is part of a livelihood strategy. Following the sustainable livelihood approach, where livelihood strategies are defined as “the range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals” (DFID 2002), the aim of this article is to highlight how and why migrants choose a destination and a particular type of work. Here, strategies can be broadly divided into *coping strategies*, which only enable men to meet their households' basic needs (Gill 2003), and *accumulative strategies*, through which land may be bought or thanks to which children may receive an education in a private school (Deshingkar and Start 2003).

This conceptual framework is more adequate to account for the realities of migration in Nepal than a neo-classical analysis such as Todaro's (1969), who focuses only on the wage differential between rural and urban areas to explain migration. Indeed, temporary migration from western Nepal can be considered as a culture in which networks are part of cumulative causes underlying such movement of people (Massey 1990).



**FIGURE 1** Location of the study areas. (Map by Tristan Bruslé)

However, social capital theories (Portes 1998) are only partly applicable to our case study because, as we will see, belonging to a network is not an absolute necessity in order to venture into Uttarakhand. At the same time, analysis of the Nepalese migration situation shows that some points made by the New Economics of Labor Migration (Stark and Bloom 1991) apply as well; according to this theory, the decision to migrate is taken at household level, with as little risk as possible in mind while the context is one of “a variety of market failures” (Massey et al 1993). World system theories which assert that the expansion of capitalism is the root cause of migration in the Third World (Castles and Miller 1998) cannot be applied to the Nepalese case, where population mobility has for a long time been part of household strategies (as stated by Skeldon 1990).

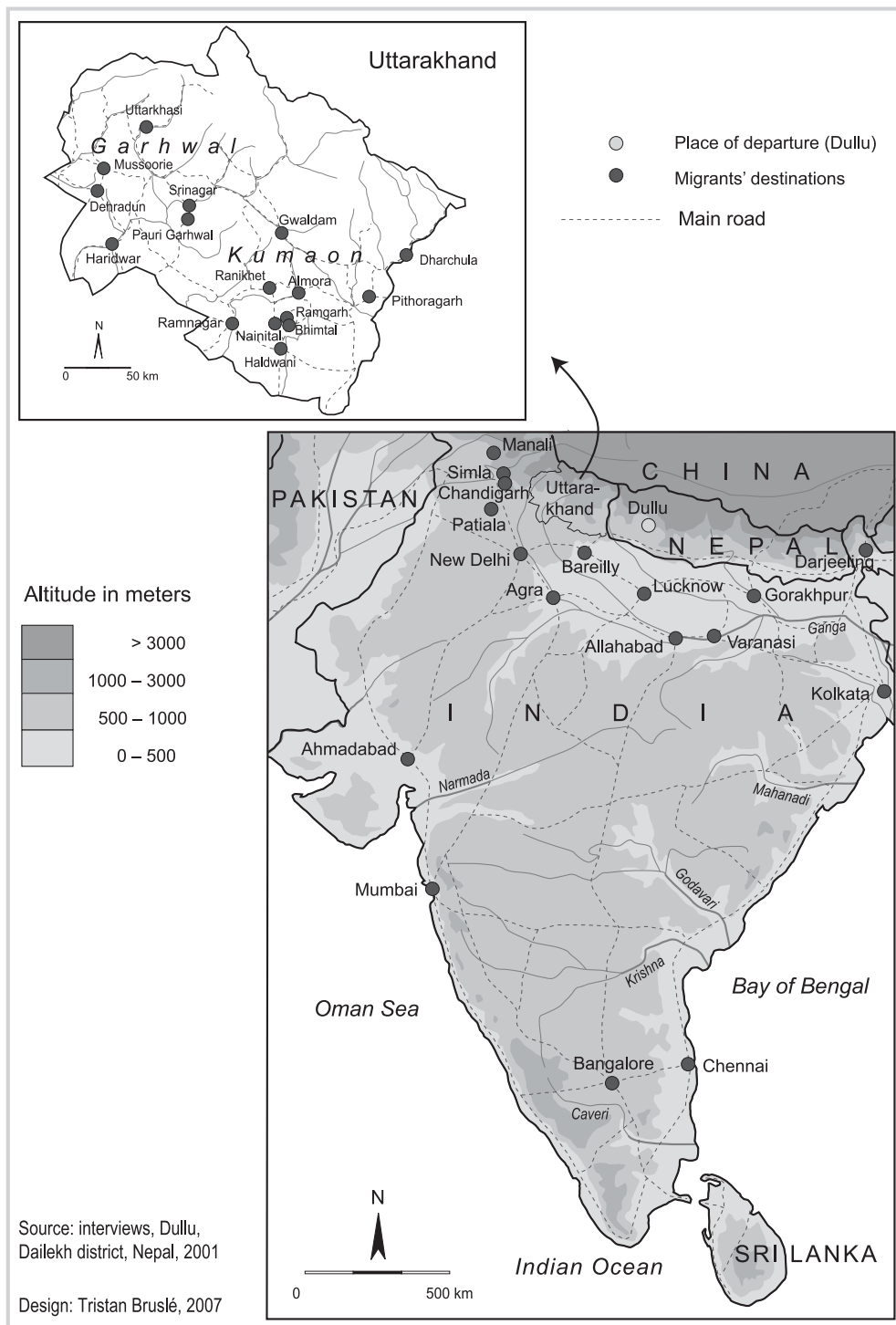
### Temporary migration as a tradition

Gill (2003) assumes that “labour migration has been a feature of Nepalese livelihood strategies for at least 200 years.” In mid-western and far-western hill villages, labor migration represents a vital part of rural systems without which life, for most people, would not be sus-

tainable. Since the economy relies on two main sources of income, rural systems may be described as “agri-migratory.”

According to interviews conducted in India for the present study, many elder migrants remember the time when they went to the Terai (southern plains bordering India) and to India in wintertime to sell refined butter (*ghiu*) or medicinal herbs, or to graze buffaloes. At the same time, in Hindi novels set in Kumaon in the 1930s or 1940s, the Nepalese are synonymous with coolies who carry luggage or palanquins (*dandi*) (Pande 2005). In Nepal, the status of temporary migrant worker is passed down from father to son, just as the status of farmer is. Hence, India’s industrialization is not the main cause of migration from Nepal to Uttarakhand.

The hills and mountains of mid-western and far-western Nepal are the country’s most backward regions in terms of the Human Development Index (UNDP 2004). Poverty and a permanent lack of food was described more than thirty years ago by McDougal (1968), Gurung (1979), and Bishop (1990), who wrote that the Karnali zone was only producing two thirds of its needs at the end of the 1960s. Nowadays, as Nepal has been dependent on India for cereals



**FIGURE 2** Destinations chosen by migrants from Dullu (Dailekh district). The scattering of destinations reflects the different strategies migrants follow, and the different networks they belong to. For cultural and proximity reasons, they favor northern India. (Map by Tristan Bruslé)

since 1995 (Adhikari and Bohle 1999), food shortages have become even more marked. In Dullu (Dailekh district), only 13% of all farms were self-sufficient in 1998 (Lecomte-Tilouine and Smadja 2003). Among 34 migrants interviewed in Pithoragarh in 2002, only one third produced enough subsistence food. In mid-western and far-western regions, temporary migration, which is described as “coming and going” (*aune-jane*), is “an inherent part of life of young men” as it is in the village of Sainik Basti (Kaski district) (Wyss 2004).

The interviews conducted for the present study showed that boys had known since their infancy that they were bound to spend time in India, working as coolies or watchmen. It is a “rite of passage” that must be gone through in order to become an adult. When young men get married and families rely on them, migration becomes compulsory. It is thus seen as a constraint (*bhadyata*) that one has to cope with, and at the same time it is considered to be a habit (*bani*), a kind of tradition (*calan*) which one has to embrace, albeit reluctantly. Among the host of job opportunities, for all the

migrants interviewed in Uttarakhand working in India was the simplest way of earning their living, without requiring much social and financial capital. Labor migration (to India or elsewhere) is a resource, in the same way as agriculture or wage employment in the village or the nearby town. Most migrants use foreign employment as a coping strategy, in particular for paying back costly loans (interest rates amount to as much as 5% per month). Most former migrant workers in the villages of Doti and Dailekh cannot rely on pensions and do not benefit from the social and economic prestige of international migration. Only a few of them were and are able to follow accumulative strategies which enable them to build a new house or buy land in the Terai.

### Choosing a destination: a matter of inheritance, networking, and chance

At household level of analysis, geographical approaches to places and the social capital theory (Massey et al 1993) are more useful to understand how migrants choose a destination than neo-classical theories which focus on “rural–urban ‘expected’ income differential” (Todaro 1969). From far-western and mid-western regions, migrants go to places anywhere in India, to big cities North and South, to the fields of Punjab or to Uttarakhand (Gill 2003, field observations). Contrary to studies according to which migration underlines the importance of social networks in building transnational spaces, our case study shows that there is no definite link between one village and one destination. For migrants from Dullu, for example, places of work are scattered all over India (Figure 2). As far as the destination strategy is concerned, several factors are taken into account by migrants.

Destinations in India are usually associated with a specific kind of job. The job of watchman (*caukidar*) is the one done by most Nepalese migrants in all major Indian cities (see Thieme 2006 about watchmen in New Delhi), whereas more seasonal or temporary jobs are undertaken elsewhere. The choice of work and destination is also linked to the availability of manpower on the farm: according to the author’s field observations, migrants in Delhi belong to larger households (4.6 adults on average) than those in Uttarakhand (4.3). To become a watchman, investments (such as buying the right to be a night watchman) are necessary at the beginning, so the migrant has to stay a long time away from the farm where work has to be done by the people left there. In Uttarakhand, the jobs available can be undertaken for a shorter span of time and are easier to handle for people who have less manpower at home or who cannot pay daily laborers to replace the missing manpower: stays in India are shorter (but more frequent) and can be fitted in with the agricultural calendar. Men can thus work in India in the winter off-season, ie from November

to April, and in summertime when work in the paddy and maize fields back home can be done by women and children. In extended families, family members may be dispersed: one brother goes to Uttarakhand and comes back to the village to plow fields, another works in Delhi to secure a regular income, and a third stays in Nepal to run the farm. This strategy of risk minimizing and labor sharing fits in with the New Economics of Labor Migration (Stark and Bloom 1991).

Even though the only reason for the Nepalese to be in India is to work, or so they say, the way they regard their place of work does matter to a certain extent. When talking about the choice of destination, *topophilia* has to be taken into account, that is “the human being’s affective ties with the material environment” (Tuan 1990), which can vary from one person to another. As Gharti M., a migrant interviewed in Pauri Garhwal, says: “we are hillsmen (*pahadi*), we cannot live in the plains, it is too hot over there.” For people from far-western Nepal, going to Uttarakhand is easy because of the geographical proximity, the similar language, and because the mountain environment is like the one they leave behind. Migrants find that the degree of *foreignness* in Uttarakhand is less than it is in the Indian plains. Moreover, the fact that many Nepalese are present in Kumaon-Garhwal gives a Nepalese touch to the towns. Despite this feeling of familiarity, working in Uttarakhand is highly disparaged whereas unknown places in India are idealized as places where one is treated with a lot of respect. However, few migrants in Uttarakhand have ever worked elsewhere. Finally, for people from border districts, migration is a straightforward process: very little money is needed to eat and sleep on the way. Financial issues do not really explain the differentiation between destinations. In border towns, shopkeepers readily give credit to migrants, who pay off the loan and buy goods when they go back home.

Apart from the above-mentioned factors, the choice of destination must also be studied from a diachronic perspective because it varies during an individual’s life cycle. It is not uncommon for young male migrants to venture into unknown towns, especially in Uttarakhand. They believe that jobs are available everywhere, so they do not hesitate to go on their own or to follow a casual acquaintance to an unknown destination. Relying on luck or on sketchy information and seizing any opportunity is indeed a strategy, albeit a risky one. Some of the migrants do not manage to find a job or do not have sufficient means to go to the next town and so return home empty-handed.

After a few years of uncertainty (for some this can last up to 10–15 years) and on getting married, migrants tend to seek stability with regard to their place of migration. Most of the men the author met in Pithoragarh had been working in the town for 20–30 years.



**FIGURE 3** Coolies in Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand). Once a bus arrives at the bus station, coolies step onto it. The owners of the TV sets wait for the Nepalese to carry the load. (Photo by Tristan Bruslé)



For about half of them, Pithoragarh was “inherited” in the sense that their fathers had also headed for this town. For others, the choice of destination depended on the degree of familiarity with a particular town, on their own experience in the place, and on the ability to find a job and a place to live. In other words, perpetuating migration, and the fixity of destination, is explained here by networks as forms of social capital (Massey 1990). Belonging to a network helps migrants to enter the Indian labor market, especially in Delhi (Thieme 2006). As migrants grow older and become less willing and able to take risks, the use of social capital helps to limit financial and psychological costs, and to minimize the risks of not finding any work.

### Entering the Uttarakhand labor market; choice of work

Despite a high unemployment rate in India, the Nepalese manage to enter the labor market. Indian workers who migrate to the plains instead of doing degrading jobs are substituted by the Nepalese, who, as migrants, are prepared to work in such lowly positions. In Uttarakhand, where educated and skilled people leave the hills (Bora 1996; Kregel 1997), manual work is highly stigmatized (Purohit 1994). “The illiterate and less educated, who could possibly do manual work at public projects, look more towards long-distance destinations due to both social status and caste reasons” (Bora 1996). This leaves room for the Nepalese, whose notoriety directly derives from the Gurkhas’ martial image (Caplan 1995). Throughout India their reputation as brave, hardworking, trustworthy, honest, and cheap labor makes them prized workers. This *social labeling* (Massey et al 1993) means that the Nepalese are sought after solely on the basis of their reputation but it also confines them to lowly jobs, which are synonymous with “immigrant jobs” (ibid). In Uttarakhand, this is expressed in a derogatory way when the word *Dotiyal* (meaning people from today’s district, and the former kingdom, of Doti) is used when addressing the Nepalese, who associate it with the Indians’ contempt (*hela*) towards them. It is felt as being oppressive and underlies the domination and exploitation of the Nepalese, whereas the word *Bahadur* (meaning “brave”), a common middle name for Nepalese men, is much preferred by migrant workers.

The range of available jobs is limited to unqualified, casual, and badly paid work, mainly as porter or roadworker. The main niche is the one of porter (coolie) in towns where all goods and commodities are carried by workers on their backs (Figure 3).

Once a migrant arrives in town, he can start working as a porter, with just a jute bag on his back to protect it and a strap to carry loads. There is no particular need to be introduced to local employers. He will sometimes work with other Nepalese on a contract (*thekka*), sometimes alone, roaming the market, waiting for wholesalers or tourists to call him. Porterage work is completely precarious and totally flexible. One advantage is that in the event of an emergency, it is possible to go home without having to report to one’s employer. But being a coolie is specially degrading, as in Uttarakhand and in western Nepal carrying loads traditionally falls to low castes (Winkler 1979). Moreover, in Tehri Garhwal state during the 19th century, under *Coolie Utar* and *Coolie Begar* systems, “the hill people had to work for the officials on tour with payment” (Rawat 1989). The cultural value of porterage is thus very low. Nowadays, as the far-western districts of Nepal are under

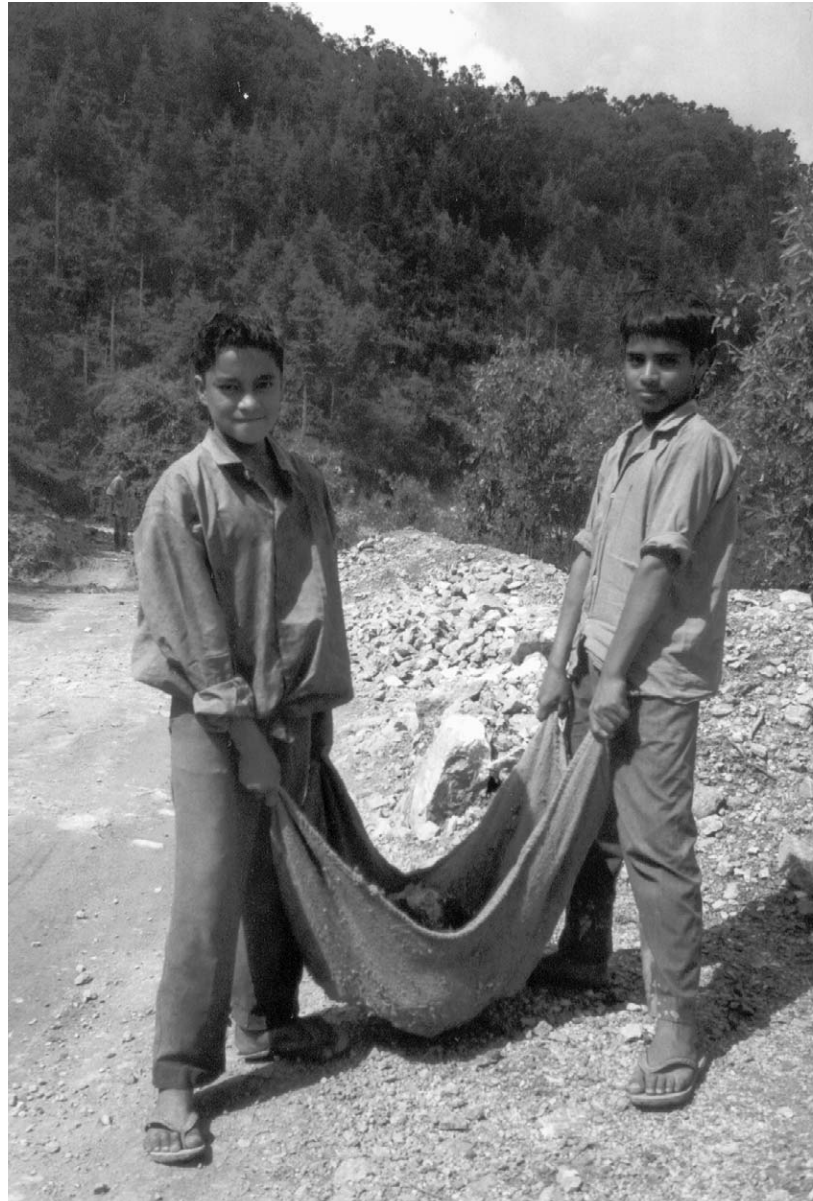
India's influence, many villagers come to border towns to shop or for medical treatment. Therefore, there is a risk that migrants holding such shameful jobs meet relatives. That is why some of them strategically avoid market places and prefer to work far from towns, on the roads. Toiling as a roadworker, however, is different in that migrants have to go through a contractor (*thekkadar*) who employs workers for road building companies (Figure 4).

Although the period of work is usually fixed from the outset, with the daily working hours and wages being clearly agreed upon, all the Nepalese interviewed had been cheated at some stage by contractors. When looking for a job as a roadworker or miner, the main issue is therefore to obtain reliable information about the contractor. Once again, migrants with a long experience of the place manage to work for trustworthy (*bishwasi*) contractors whereas others simply hope they will be paid. Working on roads or in mines gives migrants certain advantages, though. As towns and cities are considered to be places where one has to pay even for a glass of water, working far from urban centers is a way of saving money. For orthodox Brahmins, it is also a way of avoiding any possible pollution. On the building sites, they can easily cook for themselves, dressed only in a loincloth when preparing food according to Brahmanical principles. They can do this out of sight of other Nepalese, not having to feel ashamed, which would not be possible in a town or city.

The majority of migrants work for employers, whether on a temporary or on a permanent basis. Only some of them manage to get out of this traditional Nepalese niche, as in Pithoragarh, where about ten restaurants are run by Nepalese people who were also porters when they first came to the city (Figure 5). The desire to quit portage corresponds to a desire to abandon the coping strategy and to adopt an accumulative one. After a few years of work in Pithoragarh, these men managed to open small Nepalese restaurants. They were not always more educated than the average coolie but definitely had more social and financial capital. Thanks to their self-confidence and willingness to aim for greater goals than mere survival, they felt at ease in Uttarakhand where they were close to many Indian shop owners. They had also been able to save enough money for investment and seized the opportunity of renting a restaurant as soon as they found out that a place was up for rent.

Running a cheap food outlet enables migrants not only to step out of the labor class, but to earn more money and even to bring their family to India. One of their two main aims is to send their children to private school, the other one is to buy land in the Terai plains of Nepal. In the long run, temporary migration to India may lead to permanent migration within Nepal, from the mountains to the plains.

**FIGURE 4** Young roadworkers in Uttarakhand. First-time migrants from Baitadi still wear school uniforms. They have come with their fathers and contribute to the household economy by earning between US\$ 1.5 and 2.2 per day. (Photo by Tristan Bruslé)



## Conclusion

For households in far-western districts, agriculture in Nepal and wage employment in India are complementary activities. Livelihood strategies definitely comprise diversification of income sources and mobility patterns. Given household constraints and individual ambitions, the choice of a destination and of work can thus be explained by a set of factors.

First, the migrant (and his family) must choose a destination where the type of job is compatible with manpower requirements at home. Working as a porter in Uttarakhand in the off-season is an easy way to



**FIGURE 5** Restaurant owner in Mussoorie. The owner of this cheap food outlet started as a coolie 20 years ago. Then he took a job as a watchman and finally opened this restaurant. He went from a coping strategy to an accumulative one. (Photo by Tristan Bruslé)



secure income earned in India and food production in Nepal, whereas working as a roadworker is more restricting due to the longer-term contract between the migrant and his employer. Nevertheless, the spatial scattering of a household's manpower is part of a livelihood strategy which corresponds to risk minimizing as stated by the New Economics of Labor Migration. At individual level, choosing a destination in Uttarakhand is a matter of "feeling at ease" in India. For a majority of migrants, Uttarakhand's environment is easy to handle, whereas this is not the case with bigger towns. Cultural values are also of importance in the choice of work, in a context where working as a porter is stigmatized. As men move for years between their village and India, in "pluri-local transnational social spaces" (Pries 2001), foreign places are appropriated and become familiar. It helps migrants to go to the same place year after year. Furthermore,

this familiarity is combined with the presence of migrant networks, based on their region of origin and/or caste, which helps migrants to settle temporarily and find a job. Affective relations to places and social capital are complementary factors which explain their unvarying choice of destination. However, networks alone do not explain the choice of destination made by younger migrants, who purposely avoid using the help some acquaintances could provide. For older first-time migrants, in the absence of social capital, they also need luck and a sense of adventure to enter the labor market. In both cases, networks fail to express the attractiveness of certain places.

However, it is an absolute necessity for migrants who wish to move on from the coping strategy to accumulate economic and social capital. The more ambitious their aim is in migrating, the more capital is needed. In that case, ambitious migrants usually

begin by working in Uttarakhand as coolies, and as the years go by, their aims change, as their social and financial capital increases. If an opportunity arises, they are able to move on to a more accumulative strat-

egy by opening a small restaurant. As a consequence their status is enhanced along with their financial capital, and their migration destination becomes entrenched.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

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