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Nepalese migrations: Introduction

Tristan Bruslé

"Jahan pani alu paincha, Nepali paincha"
(Where there are potatoes, there are Nepalese)

This saying is now truer than ever. Permanent migrations to the Tarai and to urban areas have constantly been on the rise since the 1970s so that the once mountainous Nepalese population is today mostly made up of plain-dwellers. In 2009, every day 700 to 800 Nepalese workers headed for foreign countries, other than India. Not a single day goes by without news of some Nepalese worker stranded in some faraway place. Even though it is impossible to find out exactly how many Nepalese work abroad, there are an estimated 4 to 6.5 million people working permanently or temporarily outside their country.[1]

The myth according to which "peasantry is immobile and migration on a large scale really began with industrialization and urbanization", as discussed by Skeldon (1990: 1) about population mobility in developing countries also applies to Nepal. "Sedentarist visions" (Sheller and Urry 2006) have often been the trademark of research on Nepalese hill societies. Mobility and migration are still considered, by development agencies in particular, as residual or as something to remedy, a pathology (Sharma 2008). Yet, as often mentioned in scientific works, mobility is nothing new in Nepal (See Subedi 1999). Not only highlanders, but also people from the hills and from the Tarai have long managed to earn their livelihood by supplementing their income with jobs in different places. Today still, mobility pervades the life of almost every Nepalese. That is why it has been considered necessary to devote a whole EBHR issue to migrations in Nepal, where for the past decades there has been a complete reversal of population distribution, from the hills to Tarai, and a geographically broader range of labour destinations.

New mobility paradigms affect Nepal, which has been actively involved in the globalisation of manpower at least since the first Gurkha recruitments at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, as Skeldon (2008) emphasises at a global level, the scale of international migration must not conceal the importance of internal movements. Moreover, this author states that "we need to integrate internal and international population movements within a single framework" (*Ibid.*:

[1] Thieme (2006) states that there are between 1 to 3 million Nepalese migrants in India, whereas Bruslé (this issue) reports that 1.3 to 2.6 million migrants work in the Gulf. Four thousand of them are said to live in Malaysia.

29). In the case of Nepal, this has just started (see Bohra and Massey 2009), and further research should be encouraged. Recent research reports, such as the Nepal Migration Book (NIDS 2008) or the one by Hollema *et al.* (2008), give a complete overview of migration, from forced to labour or study migration, at both internal and international level. In an integrative view of South Asian population movements, Sinha (2009) associates the study of Nepalis of Indian origin with that of Indians of Nepali origin, and considers the many points they have in common to be worth studying together.[2] Studies about remittances (Central Bureau of Statistics 2003; Gurung 2003 among others) also suppose that incomes earned outside one's "usual" residency combine internal and international sources. Yet any connection between the different kinds of mobility still needs to be assessed. For example, the various ways people in a same household tackle permanent migration to the Tarai and contract-based migration to the Gulf, with seasonal labour in the Uttarakhand hills, should be studied in a livelihood perspective but also with regard to patterns of mobility.

I will quickly review some of the main themes that stand out in the articles making up this special issue.

Migration processes

When talking about migration processes, education is a major incentive to leave one's home and this phenomenon is on the rise. Whether it is the hope of a better education for their children in the Tarai or in Kathmandu (Aubriot) or for the migrants themselves abroad (Adhikari), it would appear that attempts to improve one's standard of education reflect a change in Nepalese society, undoubtedly linked to the spread of middle-class values (See Liechty 2002). As shown by Adhikari, education can be used as a reason to travel and work abroad, with private education institutes thus taking a share of the manpower agencies' business. Ghimire adds that access to a better education is definitely a reason for forced migrants to stay in urban areas, thus thwarting government plans for a return to the villages.

With reference to the government, its role as an actor of migration (Graner) is ineffective, or rather it would seem that liberal policies govern migration policies. It tends to be inundated with private, individual and sometimes collective initiatives. Despite existing bans and controls on some forms of migration (women to the Gulf countries or families to urban areas or to the Tarai), migrants find strategies to sidestep legislation. As for international labour migration, Adhikari as well as Bruslé show that the weakness of Nepalese state policies is detrimental to

[2] A review of *The Indian Nepalis, Issues and Perspectives (2009)* is available in this issue.

migrants, who have to mostly rely on short-term profit based private companies. The numerous cases of fraud can be attributed to such limited government actions. Other actors associated with migration have emerged in the Nepalese public sphere. These are urban associations which deal with newcomers and long time settlers (Berardi Tadié) or transnational activists who, despite being far from Nepal, are determined to carry weight on the political scene (Sijapati). In the case of women migrants, new forms of financial self-help associations are brought to light by Thieme and Müller-Böker.

In migration studies, networks have long been investigated in order to grasp how migration is organised. We can see in the subsequent articles that the strength of networks indeed explains the perpetuation of migration, in Delhi (Thieme and Müller-Böker), in Hastings (Adhikari), in Pokhara (Berardi Tadié) and in Qatar (Bruslé). Village- or caste-based networks play an important role in explaining a choice of destination.

Migrations on different scales

The links between different types of migration have been the focus of many articles. Ghimire and Aubriot underline links between conflict-induced migration and urbanisation, though in different contexts. As Ghimire notes, the town where migrants have been forced to settle becomes the primary place for earning one's living, whereas the village slowly becomes a place reserved for rituals and family memories. The process of breaking away from one ancestors' village can in fact be quite a rapid one. A reversal of values is now under way, with the younger generation shunning the village.

Yet what is striking, according to Shrestha, is that permanent migration to the Tarai, described by the Nepalese as a quest for an easier life, also leads to more seasonal migration to India. This is corroborated by Aubriot. The links between internal and international migration are also emphasised by Graner when she explains that some contractors (*thekkadar*) in the carpet industry now run recruitment agencies. Skills initially learnt for recruitment at national level are used for sending migrants abroad. In Qatar, some migrants admit that they first went to Kathmandu to work in the carpet industry and then, when there was a slump in the sector, they ventured on to Qatar. The first experience of migration acquired in the Nepalese capital therefore helped them cross the border —Kathmandu being a stepping stone— to ultimately land in Doha.

Life abroad

All the articles stress the fact that living abroad, considered as something that has not really been consciously chosen (Thieme and Müller-Böker about Delhi), is associated with much disillusion and renunciation. Accounts by migrants insist on the "grass is greener on the other side" aspect which is often described and idealised before departure. Sijapati insists on the loneliness and discrimination Nepalese workers face in New York. Adhikari very accurately shows how the passage of time is important for nurses to get used to their new, difficult life in England. Even for internal, yet forced migration, the theme of pain (*dukh*) and indignity (*beijat*) emerges when people are forced to buy food, instead of eating their own production (Ghimire). It is important to compare this discourse about *dukh* with the pervasive official discourse whereby migration is the solution for the country's future, notwithstanding the painful experiences endured by migrants, notably at work.

Gender aspects

In 2008, 4.2% of international migrants (*i.e.* not including India) were women (NIDS 2008), though specific studies about them are still scarce. Some research focuses on women left behind in the villages (Kaspar 2005) or about women returning from the Gulf countries (O'Neill 2007), but hardly any studies exist about women's experience of migration (Thieme), even though the carpet business has traditionally been a woman's niche (Graner). If we consider that being away from one's family and village could help generate new affirmative behaviour, migration could be seen as a form of liberation. This very question of women's emancipation is raised by Thieme who asserts that migrants' wives who stay behind in the villages "do not gain more independence" while those with their husbands in Delhi have slightly more autonomy but are more or less trapped in their dwelling-place even if they work in the daytime. Aubriot confirms the fact that women's power to decide within the household only marginally increases when their husband is abroad. By contrast, O'Neill (2007: 301) states that women's experiences in the Gulf have "served to increase their sense of autonomy and agency". Being a migrant's wife is described as painful in Pokhara though women's associations there are supportive of those left behind (Berardi Tadié), whereas women who arrive forcibly in towns are "caught between the wishes of their husband and the aspirations of their children" (Ghimire).

Future issues

Apart from what has been studied both here and in other articles, I would like to suggest a few research proposals for the years to come. I am of the opinion that research on Nepalese migrations definitely requires more input from case studies in order to benefit from both a comparative and comprehensive perspective. As a developing country sending large numbers of migrants and receiving vast amounts in remittances, Nepal certainly has a lot to teach anyone interested in migration and "incipient diasporas" (Sheffer 1995).

Studying the culture of migration (See Cohen 2004, Kandel and Massey 2002, Massey *et al.* 1993) could be a promising field of research where attempts could be made to go beyond the "push and pull" factors or other theories to explain migration. Macfarlane (1976) had already talked about it regarding the Gurungs and the fact that Gurkha migration was considered a norm for youngsters. Adhikari and Seddon (2002) focus on some Lahure songs and writings from Pokhara, which are part of a culture of migration defined as "those ideas, practices and cultural artefacts that reinforce the celebration of migration and migrants" (Ali 2007: 39). Studying all aspects of these migration cultures would not only enable us to better understand migration itself but also social changes in Nepal.

Focusing on the places where migrants venture –home, villages of origin, places of transit and of destination– would help understand how territory and migration are linked. Migration leads to the creation of new territories and places. New lives span from Tarai villages and towns to ancestral homes in the hills; household members are scattered over various places on a global scale. How do places inhabited by migrants and their families evolve? One must also bear in mind the new places which become part of migrant's lives: airports, rooms in labour camps which are considered to be intimate territories, informal meeting points abroad.[3] How are they integrated in the migrant's territory? Another question, in this context, is about how the new generation relates to agriculture: can new kinds of relationships to land be observed?

Lastly, migration studies' attention which for a decade has been focused on links between migration and development[4] should now turn to

[3] These *Nepali chowk*, as temporary places, exist in central Doha (Bruslé this issue), in Paris (in a park near La Chapelle subway station), in London (at West Hounslow station) or at the Dongdaemun station in Seoul (http://saladtv.kr/?document_srl=81450).

[4] For an introduction, see Taylor (2006) or De Haas (2008).

the Nepalese example.[5] Studies at local level should be favoured in order to understand how migration affects social transformations among migrant and non-migrant households, but also how development itself leads to further migrations (See Bohra and Massey 2009). Adopting the hypothesis that migration is one of the factors that changes Nepalese society, the role of economic and social remittances (Levitt 1998) in the changing social and spatial Nepalese landscape should be researched, bearing in mind the spatial and social bias of access to migration.

For all these goals to be attained, research needs to focus at the same time on structures and individual agency (Castles 2007), that is migrants and their potentiality as "agents of modernity" (Osella and Osella 2006: 571), hometown associations (Vertovec 2004), migration intermediaries and state migration policies.

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[5] Aubriot (this issue) studies the impact of migration on village agriculture and land tenure. See also Khanal, N.R. and T. Watanabe (2006) about migration and agricultural changes.

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