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Young Nepali Labour Migrants in India

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TITLE: Marginal but modern: Young Nepali labor migrants in India

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ABSTRACT:

Migration to India has been one of the key livelihood strategies amongst marginal households in the middle hills of Nepal. Based on an ethnographic fieldwork in western and far-western hill villages in Nepal, including tracing the experience of young men who take on adult responsibility to travel to find work opportunities in Mumbai and Nainital town in India, this article discusses how the steady flow of marginal migrants from the middle hills is shaped and sustained by gendered and generational considerations. An intriguing aspect of young migrants' life in India is their participation in consumption of modern commodities despite their marginal position and difficult working condition.

KEY WORDS: Migrants, Nepal, India, Consumption, Modernity, Gender, Ethnography

Introduction

Male labour migration across the border to India forms an important livelihood strategy among households in middle hills in Nepal (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1995; Hutt 1998; Seddon, Adhikari et al. 2002). Hardly any area in the hills of Nepal remains untouched by the practice of young men's outflow to India or increasingly in the recent years to various global destinations. In the villages and towns throughout the region people often say that there is no one left in the villages but the old people, women and little children. While this does not mean that all young men out-migrate; the historical practice of out-migration combined with higher aspiration among younger generation to leave rural villages in search of employment and associated opportunities to participate in consumption activities in cities and towns, often means that those who stay back are equally affected by 'culture of migration' (Cohen 2004). The concept of 'culture of migration' adequately captures the pervasive nature of migration in the middle hills that has a long remained a historical practice among the village households. Furthermore, migration decision is a part of everyday life experience, and households consider migration as one of the key strategies of managing their livelihoods, although not everyone migrates.

Academic, policy and popular accounts about this form of labor migration typically assume that economic logic and fragile agriculture and environment dictate migrants' decisions and strategies. While there is no doubt that economic considerations and fragile environment in the middle hills are extremely important to explain male labor migration across the border to India, it does appear that these authoritative accounts underestimate the importance of socio-cultural factors (Sharma 2008).

This article analyzes how young migrants from the middle hills make sense of the migration experience to India and how their migration decisions are shaped not just by economic considerations or fragile agriculture and environment but also by a set of gendered and generational considerations. It argues that young men's mobility

reflects both the gendered ideals of 'save there and eat there' (Watkins 2003) and a desire not only to escape the more regimented social order of village but also to attain independence, experience a distant place and consume 'modern' commodities. Drawing on the work of Mills (1997) on young rural women migrants in Bangkok, this article approaches young migrants not just as *workers* but also as *consumers*.

This article is based a year long ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in 2004-05, as a part of my doctoral research on male migrants who travelled to find work in India, in a hill village in western central Nepal and in the Indian city of Mumbai, and another fieldwork that I conducted in February-March 2010 with young migrants from far-west and mid-western Nepal who worked mainly as porters in the Indian town of Nainital. In addition to formal and informal interviews with young men about their migration decision and experience, I carried out participant observation in their work place and accommodation in the destination.

In the following paragraphs, this article provides a brief overview of history and trends in migration from Nepal to India. It shows that subsistence agriculture combined with male labor migration has remained the key feature of livelihoods in the middle hills in Nepal, among the poorer households. The next section discusses that the decision-making revealing that migration to India is far more complex than an economic venture and highlights the socio-cultural dimension, particularly the prevailing normative practices, expectations and standards, social roles and obligations. The paper then looks at life in Mumbai and Nainital focusing on my fieldwork with a group of young men from Palpa, Gulmi, Kalikot and Doti districts in the western hills. This reveals that within the constrained working and living conditions, young men working and living in Mumbai and Nainital were not only trying their luck and exploring possibilities for realizing their dreams but were also involved in a varieties of consumption activities. The article concludes by making a few remarks on the gendered and generational dimension of male labour migration from the middle hills in Nepal.

Migration to India: nature, history and trend

The middle hill in Nepal is often understood as a 'place' of fragility, both in terms of fragile environment but also in terms of fragile livelihoods (Macfarlane 1976; Ives and Messerli 1989; Blaikie, Cameron et al. 2001). Like communities throughout the Himalayan region, those in Nepal are facing rapid changes in their environmental and political-economic contexts. Population growth, climate variation, various forms of modernization, market expansion and globalization have put tremendous pressure on the communities living in fragile environments (Macfarlane 2001; Blaikie, Cameron et al. 2002; Jodha 2005). One of the main household responses has been to intensify the historical practice of migration in search of work opportunities. After their re-study after 20 years, Blaikie et. al. (2002) concluded that migrant remittances had played an important role in contributing to sustainable rural life more than their original study of 1970s emphasized. Similarly, in a more recent account, reflecting on 30 years of change in the same middle hill village, Macfarlane (2001) found that the communities studied had responded to ecological collapse by out-migration, although he noted that people left behind were bearing the burden of out-migration, visible in their material impoverishment. These longitudinal observations indicate the significance of labor migration for household livelihoods in the middle hills.

Migration across the border to India has historically been a significant feature of household livelihoods in the middle hills of Nepal. 'An important aspect of the relationship between India and Central Nepal is the close connection arising from the stringencies of hill agriculture on the one hand and the cash value of Indian employment on the other' (Hitchcock 1961: 15). The first wave of migration began in 18th and 19th centuries when the state policies and agrarian changes forced peasants in the hills to move out of their land and seek their livelihoods elsewhere, both within Nepal and across the border into India (Regmi 1978). Although it is

difficult to know the exact number of Nepali migrants in India because of the open-border¹, it is estimated that about 1.2-1.5 million, which accounts for just under half of total migrants, Nepalis migrate to India on a temporal basis in search for work, many of them in the Indian police force or army and service sector (Seddon, Adhikari et al. 2001; Thieme 2006; Brusle 2007; Sharma 2007; Brusle 2008), of whom about 90 per cent are men. Migration of young men started with the recruitment to serve in the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh and then into the British army in India. Since then there has been substantial temporary labour migration from the hills across the border into India in order to make up for the low incomes in hills areas and to cover the needs of local rural communities throughout the year (Hitchcock 1961). Such a quest for livelihoods has created durable exchanges across the border.

Pushed by difficult economic conditions at home, middle hill households have long relied on the comparatively large economy of their immediate neighbor in the south. The flow of Nepali migrants has been facilitated and sustained by social networks among the migrants and their households (Thieme 2006). The unique open border between the two countries, formalized by the treaty of 1950, allows the citizen of both the countries to cross the border without having to produce official documents and offers equal treatment of both citizens.

In the recent years, hill men have not just continued to migrate to work in India but also began to migrate to new destinations, mainly the Gulf States and Malaysia. This new wave of migration has created new transnational links, connecting very distant countries, cultures and economies. Although most Nepalis continue to migrate to

¹ In contrast to that with its northern neighbor, China, Nepal shares an open 1751-kilometer border with India, which people of both countries may readily cross through any point and at any time, ostensibly without producing an identity document. The open border between the two states is as old as the demarcation itself. The Nepal-India Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 formally gave citizens of both countries equal employment rights in the other country and the right to unhindered passage across the border. The 1950 treaty and the letters of exchange that followed the treaty state that neither country may unilaterally introduce travel provisions that might restrict free movement of people across the border.

work in India, over the years the proportion of Nepali migrant laborers to India has decreased from 80 per cent in 2000 to 41 in 2009 (World Bank 2010), mainly due to the emergence of other migrant destinations following the second wave of work migration from Nepal.

Migration to India is a very common practice among the poorer households in the western hills of Nepal (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1995; Thieme 2006; Brusle 2007). Data from 2001 census showed that 95 per cent of migrants from mid-west and 99 per cent from far-west Nepal went to India. Migration to India is circulatory in nature. The practice of migration to work in India starts often at a younger age, and many continue to travel back and forth until they are old.

Young men migrate to various destinations in India. The most common destinations from the western hills include: Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Pune, Ludhiana, Amritsar and Almora, Nainital, Pithauragadh. Over the years, social networks and inheritance have played a crucial role in sustaining the migration circle between the origin villages in western hills and specific destinations in India (Thieme 2006; Brusle 2008). Except for some adult men who work in government, police or army, most young migrants work in menial and low paid jobs in the service, manufacturing and agricultural sector.

The official contribution of remittances to Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2009 was USD 2.7 billion or 22 per cent of the GDP. Remittances sent from India, which is largely sent outside the official banking system, continues to contribute to the economy and livelihoods in Nepal (Seddon, Adhikari et al. 2001; Thieme 2006). An estimate by Kollmair and others suggests that remittance from India constitutes less than 20 per cent of the total remittance flow in Nepal (Kollmair, Manandhar et al. 2006). While the actual per capita remittance from India appears to be far lower, it is very significant because of its direct contribution to household livelihoods of the poorer section of the population. Migration to India is subsistence in nature; it does not help in the upward social mobility of the households but it helps the household to manage their everyday survival (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1995). Because the migration to

India does not cost significant amount of money, it is accessible to the poorer households. Although the monetary returns are not significant, it is a major source of livelihoods for the poorer households living in marginal areas, who have established livelihoods networks in various parts of India.

Decision-making

To most of the people I interacted with and studied in the middle hills, the answer to the question—why do young Nepali men go to work in India— was self-explanatory. The age-old practice of young men travelling to work in India was simply considered a thing to do as a part of managing the livelihoods of their households. Thus, the first thing to be said about this movement to India from the perspective of households in the middle hills is that there is nothing exceptional about this practice (Sharma 2008). A more interesting question to consider is- under what conditions do young men take decisions to migrate. Environmental, agrarian and socio-economic fragility in the hills of Nepal shape the context in which these decisions are made but it provides very little insights into the actual process of decision making from the young men's perspective. At the same time a rational economic approach to migration tends to isolate economic decision-making, and consequently does not analyse the cultural, gendered and social contexts in which these decisions are made. My fieldwork on young men's migration to India shows that economic compulsions seem quite essential in determining choices they make about migration but choices are far more complex embedded in socio-cultural norms, meanings and expectations.

Practice of *bhāgne* (to run away)

One of the common themes that runs across most of the stories of young men's migration to India is *bhāgne* or running away. The practice of running away to India is gendered i.e. it is always performed by the young men. Almost any conversation on *bhāgne* is full of giggles and laughter that signifies it's meaning, which is associated with fun, wandering (*ghumna*) and an excitement to see a distant place.

Boys leave home as young as twelve years old, without consulting their parents but often with the support of friends or other villagers, to wander around in different places in India. As long as the eldest member in the villages could remember, this has remained a common practice in village life. Most Nepali migrants I met in India started their career of migration to India with *bhāgne* when they were young and continued to travel back and forth since then. This feature has implications for understanding the practice of *bhāgne* as a *rite of passage* to adulthood.

Young men leave home in small groups of 2-4 from the village, usually motivated and/or accompanied by other men from the village who had been to India. The clothes, hairstyle, opportunities for rail and bus travel, cash, radio, mobile phone, use of language, movie talk and the stories of glamour brought back by the migrants who returned to the village during holidays and the ideas of life outside the village, which they hear through radio and school text-books, exposes young men with the life outside of their village.

The adolescent boys either borrow money from their friends or stole money from their parents, which is needed to meet their travel expenses. In a few other cases, the experienced migrant, a relative or a neighbour, finances the travel expenses and takes them along and eventually finds work for them to meet regular expenses. Those who are unaccompanied by experienced migrant usually take the address of some of their relatives or neighbours in the destination and live with their support once they reach there. After spending a few weeks in one or two cities, some of them return home, while others continue to work and come home only after earning money. For many *bhāgne* provides a good escape from the strict control of their parents and the school.

A 15-year-old Magar² boy, who was working as a domestic worker in Mumbai, told me that he ran away at the age of 14 with one of his school friends like many others from his village. He ran away to wander (*ghumna*), enjoy (*ramailo*) and watch Hindi

² A hill ethnic group.

movies (*film herna*) and may be to find work (*kaam garna*) and earn money (*paisa kamauna*) to support his family. Going to India was not uncommon in his family as two of his brothers were working in Delhi and his father had worked in India for more than 20 years. However, neither he nor his friend informed their parents about their plan. However, their parents and close relatives came to know about them later through other friends in the village after they had left the village. To cover his travel expenses, he secretly sold the hen that belonged to his household. When I met him in Mumbai, he was planning to go home after a few months with some savings and would decide later if he wanted to continue working in Mumbai or continue his studies in the village.

Another 14-year-old young Dalit ('lower-caste ex-untouchable') boy from a very remote village in mid-western hill, who was working as a porter in Nainital town, told me about how excited he was to see bus for the first time in his life when he arrived in the East-West highway. He ran away from home at the age of 13, after stealing some money of his mother, with two of his distant relatives who were going to work in Nainital. He was excited about opportunities to travel by bus, train and earn money in India. It took him three and half days of walk to reach the road and catch bus in the East-West highway. He was already saving about IRs 7000 money through hard work in Nainital, which he had deposited with a shopkeeper, to bring back to his mother who lived in the village.

A Bahun³ boy of 15, whom I met in Mumbai, left home with a friend when he was 12. At that time his family was facing economic hardship and there were frequent quarrels at home so he decided to leave the family. He used the English word 'tension' and Nepali word *dikka lāgdo* to explain the situation in his family, which meant that he was tensed and annoyed. At that time he was studying in class 6 and his father wanted him to finish his SLC (School Leaving Certificate) and then look for a *jāgir*. He knew that several men from his village were working in different cities in India and were earning money to contribute to the family. He too thought that by

³ High-caste Bramhins.

going to Delhi, he would be able to work and earn some money. He left for Delhi with a friend who arranged money for the travel. Both of them left the village in the early morning, took the bus to the border town of Bhairahawa and then to Delhi. The friend who accompanied him was 4-5 years older than him and he had been to India earlier with his uncle. After reaching Delhi, they went to a neighbour from their village who was working there and stayed with him. Within a week, the neighbour helped them to find a job in a shop and later in a hotel. After a month his friend left for home, but he continued to work there. Even after working for a year, he was not able to save money as he was paid only IRs 600 per month. Nonetheless he managed to take IRs 15,000 when he went home the last time. He went home for the first time in two years and remained for about 20 days. He then he continued to work in Mumbai in India and one of his brothers joined him recently. He worked as an assistant in an architect company in Mumbai, which paid him IRs 4,300. He was able to send about IRs 20,000-30,000 home annually and seemed satisfied with his work.

Ethnic dimensions are important to understand the meaning and significance of *bhāgne*. In terms of their attitude towards childhood and the adolescence, the high-caste Bahuns are more concerned about the discipline and control of young men. Among the Bahuns, the socialization of young men involves strict control with several disciplinary codes and punishment for 'deviant' behaviour. Bahun parents expect their children to go to school, get educational qualifications and look for salaried employment or *jagir*. For this reason, *bhāgne* is clearly understood as a failure in Bahun conception of ideal man. Magars (a hill ethnic group) and Dalits display a more liberal attitude towards adolescents when compared to Bahuns. While the Magar and Dalit parents told me that they would like their children to get educated, they did not display the moral panic, like Bahuns, when children ran away. One Magar mother whose 13 year old son left home a few months previously told me that it was the choice of her son who could not do well in school and the only option available to him was to leave home and explore working opportunities. She heard that her son was working in Delhi and believed that he would be back in a few

months, with or without money. She was not ashamed to talk to about her son. Although disappointed and worried initially, among the Magars and Dalits *bhāgne* is not always viewed as deviant behavior. Young Magar men who could not get recruitment in British and Indian Army to transform themselves as much desired *lahures*⁴ often run away to Indian cities to find work. Among the poorer Dalit households in the mid-western and far-western hills, *bhāgne* is clearly a normal practice.

While some adolescents continue to leave home without informing their parents, the frequency of *bhāgne* has reduced drastically in the last two decades. Children and adolescents are encouraged to go to school, as it is widely believed that schooling opens up new prospects for social and economic mobility. Interaction with the parents and others in the village shows that, increasingly, it is not considered right for the adolescents to run away, which signified deviant behaviour (*bigranu*). High caste parents of these young boys consider that it is a matter of shame (*lajmardo kurā*) for the family and they believe that their child must have run away under the influence of others (*aruko laha-lahai ma lāgera gayeko*). High caste families instead want their children to go to school and prepare themselves for better prospects. While schooling is more common and this has led to reduction in *bhāgne* from the village, there is evidence that the pressure of schooling itself led to *bhāgne* among several young men. From the perspective of those involved, strict discipline, poor performance and corporal punishment in the school are the major reasons behind their decision to run away.

Although *bhāgne* does not always lead to employment, it nonetheless provides a wider experience of travel and offers a wider exposure to young men. They enjoy the freedom and learn about the wider world away from their home village and away from the strict control of their parents. Young boys spend a few months

⁴ This term is associated with Nepali men recruited into a foreign army, which is highly desired among the Magars. The term *lāhure* came from the name of the city of Lahore in Pakistan. It was originally used to refer to the hill men who went to Lahore to work in the Sikh leader Ranjit Singh's army in the early 19th century.

wandering as runaways and without necessarily being economically productive, and this is socially accepted.

Family responsibility

Most young men I spoke to emphasized that they left for India because of the situation back home (or what they called *ghar ko awāstha*). They spoke of migration to India as an escape from the 'difficult situation' (*gāro awāstha*) and 'hardship' (*dukha*) back home which at the same time provided them with an opportunity to improve their socio-economic situations and fulfill their obligation as responsible men. The difficult livelihoods situation at home means that young men find it difficult to fulfill their obligation in securing the material or economic needs of the household. Irrespective of their ethnic background, it is a common livelihood strategy for men from poor labouring households in the village. The situation of young men in the middle hills is very much similar to that described by Osella and Osella in the context of South India:

For boys in the poorest labouring families, adolescence hardly exists: they move from an impoverished and deprived childhood in which their parents are unable to protect them from the knowledge of adult realities into a young manhood, which immediately demands that they share their share of responsibility by dealing with those realities (Osella and Osella 2006: 40).

Krishna, a young unmarried Bahun of 19 from the western hill in Nepal was working as a helper in a restaurant in Mumbai, leaving behind his parents and two young sisters back home. When I reached Krishna's house in the village, his father was lying on a mat made of straw (*gundri*) on *pirhi* (veranda) outside the house. Suffering from diabetes and tuberculosis, he could barely work. Krishna's mother was busy working on *bāri* (non-irrigated field) beside their small hut while two of his sisters (aged 6 and 7) were playing in the courtyard with other children from the

neighbourhood. They represented a relatively poor household. As most Nepali farmers in the middle hills, they owned insufficient land to provide them with sufficient grain for the entire year. Depending on the situation, they had to buy grain for 4-6 months (*besāhā*). Krishna's father had been working as a watchman (*chowkidar*) in Delhi for 17 years, which was an important source of income for the household, until he fell ill two years previously and could no longer go back to work. This meant that the responsibility to earn money had come to Krishna and the only option available was to follow the footsteps of his father and other relatives who had been going to India for work. Eventually, Krishna was to go to Mumbai, supported by his uncle who lived next door. He was excited when his mother told him about the possibility of going to Mumbai with his uncle and he immediately accepted it. Though he had heard a lot about life in Mumbai and many of his friends had been to India, he had never had a chance to go to Mumbai. His uncle took complete responsibility for paying the travel expenses, accompanying him and finding work. When I met Krishna in a tea stall next to his workplace in Mumbai, he had been able to send money home on a regular basis for the last couple of years. He was planning to go home in the next 3 months but expected to come back to work after a month. When asked why he had decided to come to Mumbai, using the phrase *gharko awastha* he said, 'The situation of my home was not good, so I came with my uncle to find work'. As the only able-bodied man in the family, he felt that he was responsible (*jimmāwār*) for earning money and regularly sending it back home to meet economic security of his household (*ghar chalāune, ghar herne*). Though he did not feel that it was possible for him to earn a lot of money, he nonetheless felt that it was possible to earn reasonable money and improve the situation of his family back home (*kehi awasthā sudhārne, kehi rāmro holā bhanera*). To him, earning money to support his family was vital to ascertain his identity as a *jimmāwār* son (Osella and Osella 2000). He was particularly concerned about the health of his father and the education and marriage of his two little sisters. While Krishna's situation seemed to have been triggered by his father's illness, the practice of going to India is not uncommon in his family history and immediate social network.

Here, it is be useful to look at some historical as well as more contemporary evidence on agrarian relations during the 19th and 20th century, where peasants were compelled to share a proportion of their income with those who did not have a role in the production. Thus the peasants were unable to accumulate capital to increase agricultural productivity (Regmi, 1978, Blakie, Cameron et. al. 2001). This shows that the importance of going to India is not just as an escape from the exploitative social structure but also that the social structure has an impact on the construction of local idea of manhood. Although going to India to work as manual workers is more common but comparatively less desired and young men often labelled it as *phāltu kam* (useless work or work that lacked worth), it is more desirable for men to go to India to try their luck than stay in the village often managing their farm and/or working on other's land which is commonly referred to as *halo jotne* (ploughing in the field) or *bhāri bhokne* (carrying heavy weight). In this sense, going to work in India provides an escape from being referred to under the traditional category of *halo jotne or bhāri bhokne*. Thus, compared to staying back in the village as *phāltu* (useless or worthless), going to work in India opens up possibilities of being modern and developed, exploring a distant place and proving oneself as a breadwinner. The young men do not want to be seen as useless men wondering in and around the village (commonly known as *phāltu*) but aspire to migrate to be known as employed, successful and responsible men (commonly known as *jāgire* among Bahuns and Dalits or *lāhure* among Magars). It appears that development discourse that has had a particular effect in viewing the village as a traditional place to be left in the past and urban areas as modern places to be desired (Pigg 1992), has impacted on the meanings of movement in the local context. Thus, apart from viewing it as physical movement, movement of people to India or any other place was a movement in the ideological space of development and modernity too. The significance of movement to India lies in the possibility of what it offers to the individual man who move and the household and how it relates to the experience of other men in the community in the context of discourses of development that has an effect in creating rural and urban areas as social categories of differentiation (Pigg 1992). In many ways the desire to participate in a

'modern'/developed life appears to play an important role in these men's migration to India. Although, as I shall discuss below, working and living conditions in India often put tremendous pressure on the lives of these men.

Life in Mumbai: marginal but modern

Young men working in Mumbai and Nainital displayed ambivalence and complex tension between fulfilling their consumption desire and familial obligations, in the face of difficult working and living circumstances that often put their identity as men into crisis. In the cosmopolitan metro-city of Mumbai, young men worked as watchmen, domestic workers and helpers in hotels and restaurants. In the tourist hill town of Nainital, young men worked primarily as porters, construction laborers or helpers in hotels and restaurants.

For young men who arrived in India life was very different from their home. Only a few of them were aware of the difficult working and living conditions before they arrived, when they would find that they would be living in a small room shared with 4 to 6 others in the middle of a slum community in sub urban Mumbai or in small shed in a corner of Nainital, and work for long hours often in difficult and exploitative conditions. While the working space of Nepali migrants was in prominent economic space both in Mumbai and Nainital, often working as watchmen in important banks, companies, hotels or houses of economically and/or politically influential people, they lived in the invisible peripheries.

After arriving in Mumbai by train when I followed Kumar to his 'room', he told us 'do not feel bad, we live in a *jhopadpatti* (urban slum). What to do, it is like this, all of us live like this.' Hari and Anil, the two boys who travelled with us had heard of the word *jhopadpatti* but never thought that it would be like living in *jhupadi*⁵. As we were walking through the

⁵ A type of small hut in the hills that signified poverty and looked like a cowshed or firewood shed.

lanes of the slum, covering his nose with his hand, Anil reacted, 'oho! It smells really bad...what is it?' Kumar replied, 'it is like this. You will get used to it slowly. It does not smell to me at all.' We all laughed and followed Kumar along the narrow lane, avoiding stepping in the gutter. Apart from its use for drainage and a walking path, the narrow lane was a space where people bathed, washed and dried clothes, processed vegetables and was a play ground for children. A housing block that we passed just before we entered the slum settlements was the workplace for some of the Nepalis who worked as watchmen or domestic workers. (Field-notes, Mumbai 2005)

In Mumbai, commonly known as *caukidār* or *gorkhā* or *bahādur* most older Nepali men worked as watchmen who were employed in private bungalows, housing colonies, government offices, factories, hospitals or businesses. A growing but invisible workplace for the increasing number of Nepali boys (aged between 14-20) was to work as domestic workers in middle class houses in sub-urban Mumbai⁶ or to work as helpers in hotels and restaurants. They often worked long hours although their monthly income ranged from anywhere between IRs 1,200 and IRs 2,500, which was significantly lower than the income of older Nepali men who worked either as security guard or helpers in shops. Often invisible, except when they left the home for 2-3 hours day, young men who worked as domestic worker spent most of their time inside the apartment of their middle class employers. The job involved loneliness as they spent most of their time working on their own except when they would get instruction from the employer. The owners did not like their workers spending much time outside their apartment block. When instructed by the owner to buy vegetables, a Magar boy of 14 who worked as a domestic worker, always took time out to come to the tea-stand to speak to other Nepalis working in the same locality. Domestic workers spent most of their time preparing and cooking

⁶ Known as maids or *bāis*, the wife of some of the Nepali men worked as domestic workers on a part time basis for 2-3 hours a day in each house, often cooking food, cleaning clothes and washing dishes. The practice of keeping maids on a part-time basis is a very popular phenomenon in middle class houses in Mumbai.

food, cleaning dishes, cleaning the house and washing clothes. Young men I spoke to did not complain about their work although they did not see domestic help or working as helper in hotels or restaurant as a long-term job and they hoped to find 'better' work (*rāmro kām*) in 'office' later.

In Nainital, most Nepali migrants worked as porters while a few worked as daily wage laborers in construction site. The men I met in Nainital were as young as 12 and as old as 68. As soon as I got off the bus in Nainital, I saw several men carrying 'ropes', in their Nepali cap, waiting to be called by tourists to carry their luggage. Nepali migrants, locally called Dotyals (literally means those from Doti district in Nepal but is used to refer to Nepali migrants who come to Nainital from mid-western and far-western hills of Nepal), were easily identifiable by ropes in their hand and torn/dirty clothes they wear. The porters were self-employed, which gave the migrants flexibility in terms of working hours but also put them at risk if they could not find work for some reason (e.g. bad weather). All the young men I met looked very weak, fatigued and overworked. The ropes that they carried, the torn and dirty clothes they wore and extreme fatigue and pain in their face identified them as Dotyals.

The routine was regular for these men. Most of them shared the room and lived together with other migrants from the same village. They cooked and ate together in their little shack. They worked for the whole day in the market, waiting for someone to call them for work. After 5 or 6pm in the evening, they went back to their little room, cooked food, ate and slept.

They earned anywhere between IRs 100-400 per day with an average income of IRs 150-200 per day. Most migrants were particular about saving although a few ended up spending hard earned money in alcohol in the evening. They did not have bank account or a safe place in their room to keep their savings; they kept their saving with a few 'trusted' shopkeepers for safety. The shopkeepers were very honest and they got their money whenever they want, sometimes with some interest. In an average a migrant saved about IRs 20,000 in a year.

A 14-year-old boy from mid-western hill, who worked as self-employed porter, smilingly told me he was not sure if he liked being in Nainital. He referred to his dirty and torn clothes and said to me 'how can it be nice?' He was wearing an ear warmer gifted by a 'tourist'; he said he did not like the cold weather in Nainital. While he was often found to be hanging around the market area in search of work with frequent walk in the mall road that connected the two tourist hubs of the town. He would be called by a tourist or a local to carry luggage and would get paid after carrying the luggage/box to the destination. On the day I first met him, he had just earned IR 20 for carrying a bag of a tourist from the main road to the hotel. Over the last one month, he had made a saving of IRs 1,200 and he hoped to go home with the saving in a few months time. He lived with six of his friends who shared a small room, made up of rusted tin, and paid IRs 800 as rent. The room was hardly enough for six of them to sleep, but they not only slept there but cooked and ate as well. At times he worked as a labourer at the daily wage of Rs 150. He told me that he did not prefer to work as a laborer because there is more freedom when he works as a self-employed porter. He told me that as a porter one can decide when to work and when not to work, and one can take rest or take time off when one wants. Apart from working in the market, once he spent IRs 250 for a boat-ride in the lake that cost him 2 days of his earning.

When they were not working, these young men spent their time looking at tourists who visited the town of Nainital. They did not like to work in hotels which they felt was hard work and pay was not good.

Within the constrained working life in Mumbai and Nainital, from the perspective of these men, the movement to India was also related to excitement it offered. For instance Mumbai was a city of big buildings, public transport, brothels, 'beer bars', freedom, and the film industry. Nainital was a town full of tourists and money. Working in places like Mumbai and Nainital offered these men an opportunity to become involved in consumption of what was considered as modern experience. Thus, one way to characterize life in Mumbai and Nainital was the transformation that these men went through in their consumption in the destination. Let me

provide some examples of consumption practices among these marginal migrants in India.

A particular aspect of life in Mumbai was to go sight seeing to different parts of the city where there were high rise buildings, places of tourist attractions like the Gateway of India, the sea beach and occasionally to see the shooting of films or television serials in studios or outside. Commonly known as *ghumna jāne* (to wander around), this involved exploring new places for entertainment in shopping malls, market areas or film shooting. Among the people who stayed in sub-urban Mumbai, men often went on weekends to watch shooting in the film studios with the help of their friends working there. A few men worked in the film industry or at least came with the hope that they would find some work there. A few young men spoke of the desire to work in 'shooting' and watched shooting closely in their free time. In Nainital, this involved walking around the town, looking at tourists and occasionally going on an expensive boat ride.

Although they didn't always have access, television and the movies were popular forms of entertainment among the young men. Whenever there were opportunities (*mauka parda*), young men often watched movies, entertainment serials, news or cricket. Except for those who worked as domestic workers, other young migrants went see movie whenever they were free. A couple of young men told me that they never missed a newly released movie, and spent much of their earning on movies. They had up to date knowledge about the movies, movie stars, television serials and gossip.

One of the things that struck me about young men working mainly in Mumbai but also in Nainital was their use of mobile phones. In Nainital, I was intrigued to see that the young migrants, many of them who worked as porters, had mobile phone in their pocket. Almost all the Nepali men I met in Mumbai had a mobile phone, except for those who worked as a domestic helper who did not have access to the phone. Whenever I began to talk to them a mobile phone would ring with the ring tone of the latest Bollywood song. Young men often engaged in conversation with each

other on the 'functions' of mobile phone and its model. While having a mobile phone enabled them to be in touch with each other, it was also very easy for their family members back in Nepal to make phone calls to them. Whenever I sought a favour from my informants to speak to other Nepalis, my informants always took out a mobile phone and made the phone call. The difference in the use was visible when we consider how easy it was for these men to talk to their family but it was a long walk for the people in the village to reach the nearest telephone service. The widespread use of mobile phones shows the desire of these men to consume modern goods. A few migrants in Nainital invested their hard earned saving into buying mobile phones from the second hand shop for IRs 2000-3000. These migrants did not just use the mobile phone to make calls to their families back in Nepal but often used it as a music player. These men went to the computer shop in the market that downloaded the music in their phone for IRs 10 for each song.

In 2008, I was having my tea in a teashop next to a dirt road that connected the remote villages of far-western hills to the rest of Nepal and to India. A passenger bus from the border town of Dhangadi, full of young men returning home from India, stopped next to the teashop. Almost all the passengers got off for tea/snacks. There were at least 10 men carrying radio tape recorders in their neck or holding in their hand. All were well dressed, and a few younger ones were dressed in fashionable jeans, bright printed t-shirts and white sport shoes. The modern outfit of these men was significantly different to that of the outfit of those who leave the middle the middle hills for India. Although they looked extremely fatigued, both due to their hard work in India and long, difficult and tiresome journey, they were excited to come back to their home in their new clothes. Young men did not just come back in their new clothes, but they came with some gifts and savings. This image was meaningful to young men in the middle hills despite all the difficulties they faced.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the socio-cultural factors, in particular gendered ideas of obligation to support the household and adventure to experience a distant world, shape migration decision-making among young men from western hills in Nepal. The paper highlighted that a social requirement for achieving a desired form of manhood among the marginal households in the western hills of Nepal- for being a man- is migrating to India, escaping the regimented life in the village by running away and yet supporting households by sending remittances and experience a distant world and possibly get involved in consumption of material goods and commodified images.

As we saw, young men from poorer households in these marginal areas start to migrate, often accompanied by others in their first visit or as runaways, as early as 10-12 years old, and continue to travel until they are old. It can thus be seen as a *rite of passage* into adulthood, a necessary stage in their existence. This transition involves three steps: separation, transition (liminal stage), and incorporation (van Gennep 1960). These young boys do not just leave their family but also broaden their life experience beyond their immediate environment. For young men from the poorer households in middle hills of Nepal, going to India is often an escape from regimented order of the village life and away to achieve a certain idea of personal autonomy through adventure. Taking adult responsibility to experience the world beyond their village, wander around, learn to work and earn money enables these boys to enter the men's world. From the perspective of young men, travelling to India is not just about finding employment but also about experiencing excitement, independence and material consumption advancement away from the constrained life in the hills. Proving capacity to face hardships away from their familiar world and demonstrating commitment to earn money to support family are all part of young men's liminal position. Travelling to India, crossing the border and finding work involves risks and uncertainty. These men work long hours under exploitation conditions with very little pay in India. As most young men find work and begin to contribute regular income to the household, they get married and establish their family, which changes their social status although they keep travelling back and

forth between Nepal and India for most part of their life. Migration to India, even in such a marginal context, is not necessarily a pathology but a crucial stage in men's life cycle.

There is a tension between what young men desired and hoped for in terms of escaping the regimented life in the village, their obligations to contribute to the household subsistence and desire to be involved in consumption practices, and the way in which they encountered the difficult side of life in India. Excitement, freedom adventure and consumption is important for young migrant's to make sense of themselves as men, but it is sharply constrained by their living and working conditions in India and familial obligation to 'save here, eat there'. Viewing migrants as consumers rather than solely as producers reveals more complex dimensions of young men's lives in India. Young men are caught between the ideas of freedom and the responsibility that comes with migration experience. Social meanings of migration associated with adventure, freedom, excitement and consumption offer powerful avenue by which young migrants maintain a sense of meaning and purpose despite the many difficulties they face whether that is related to their obligation to send money home or their marginal life in the destination (Mills 1997). Besides economic factors, the socio-cultural ideas and experiences associated with young men's migration and its role in shaping men's lives in the middle hills sustains conditions that encourage ongoing migration of hill men to work in Indian cities.

While my arguments specifically draw on migrant men from middle hills in Nepal, it holds broader implications for study of social meanings of migration, gender and consumption in the middle hills in Himalayas or more broadly in South Asia.

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