

Cross-border mobility in South Asia and GCM: Exploring the factors driving Indian migration to Nepal and analysing the challenges faced by labour migrant

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Abstract:

India-Nepal migration is attributed to ancient ties and treaties. Open and free border agreement of 1950, facilitates the only VISA free border crossing in South Asia. The migration of citizens between the two countries are witnessing a rising trend in recent times, 2011 (around 0.71 million) in both directions. A field survey on Indian labour migrants working in various sectors of Nepal was carried out to understand the factors driving migration of people from India to Nepal, through an extensive thematic analysis. Findings highlight Indian labourers are driven to Nepal by a combined effect of compelling and attracting factors operating together. The operational factors highlight advance payment and the contractor plays an essential role in bringing of Indian labour migrants to Nepal. The current study found that compelling factors dominate over attracting factors, and labour migrants seek migration in order to achieve subsistence livelihood¹ and family well-being. Indian migrants reportedly encounter substantial challenges along with economic opportunities in Nepal. Housing, healthcare, and exploitation, which were extreme during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, considering the guidelines and objectives of the Global Compact for Migration, the current study examines the drivers of migration and level of challenges. The study direct towards a comprehensive intergovernmental dialogue on the issue of labour migrant welfare, to minimise the challenges of labour migrants.

Keywords: Labour migration, India-Nepal, GCM, Challenges, COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

International migration has become a major contributor to globalisation and development. Target 10.7.2 of Sustainable Development Goal aims “Countries to facilitate safe, orderly, regular, and responsible migration”. Recently, UN-DESA and IOM has developed specific policy frameworks for migration under Global Compact for Migration in 2019. Integration of migrants in a host country through public administration can help to reach a prism of sustainable development goals by 2030 (Rajan & Manasi, 2021). As the compilation of World Bank data shows, around 74 million people around the world migrate to developing countries in search of employment as semi-skilled and unskilled labour (Solimano, 2012). The neighbouring countries of Asia and Africa with Foreign Direct Investment experience sectoral development that attracts labourers from nearby nations to pursue employment with better wage prospects (McKenzie et al., 2014; Sengupta & Puri, 2020). Expansion of industries and globalisation of labour promotes the free movement of semi-skilled workers among developing Asia-Pacific countries, which opens a window for people to migrate to

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nearby developing nations to work in low- and semi-skilled jobs (Hugo, 2006; Adhisti, 2017).

Additionally, the costs associated with international migration are low within the distance of neighbouring nations (Mak et al., 2021). Migration from neighbouring countries presents a distinct set of possibilities and challenges due to similar cultural societies (Hugo, 2005; Kaur, 2007). Historical ties and shared geographical closeness encourage voluntary and involuntary migration. Citizens frequently migrate across borders between neighbouring countries due to the intricate interactions of social, political, and economic forces (Chakraborty et al., 2022). However, international migration to neighbouring countries also raises challenges with resource distribution, integration, and global border management (Richmond, 1988; Moyo et al., 2021; Wagner, 2022). Following a study on immigration in Europe, owners generally employ temporary migrant workers (single male migrants) from neighbouring African nations; engaged in low-paying jobs (Heisler & Heisler, 1986; Sharma, 2023).

An investigation of migration in the West African region revealed that contractors from nearby nations hired labourers to facilitate the maximum free flow of people, capital, and goods between West African countries. An international collaboration known as ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has been established (Agadjanian, 2008). People from far-flung regions of a home country, often travel outside to a neighbouring country to work as migrant workers, neglecting the distant towns within the home nation (Heisler & Heisler, 1986; Zimmermann, 2005). Since accurate information about the labour market conditions in nearby areas is easily accessible, and migrants are more likely to have concerns about distant areas (Mak et al., 2021; Sprung-Keyser et al., 2022). In a globalised world, the public-private economy has promoted the creation of labour market destinations in neighbouring countries by categorising the labour into high-skilled jobs, such as industrial workers, and low-skilled jobs, like brick making (Zimmermann, 2005; Demiroglu & Muller, 2021). Even though most labourers from South Asia consider emigration to the Middle East and Gulf countries to work in oil extraction to earn more (Weiner, 1982; Gardezi, 1991; Robinson, 2015); while, India and Nepal also receive many unskilled migrants from each country for low-skilled jobs (Seddon et al., 2002; Shrestha, 2017; Bashyal, 2020; Pató, 2015).

2. Background

The recent World Migration Report (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021) highlighted the presence of 281 million international migrants in various destinations around the world. According to 2021 Nepal census data conducted by Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, there were around 713,973 Indian immigrants reported in Nepal, with females comprising a significant 75.4% and males 24.6%. Marriage migration is the foremost reason for migration, with 38.2%. The percentage of immigrants seeking employment in the service sector increased from 6.3% to 15.2%. At the district level, Kathmandu attracted a disproportionately large number of migrants, while southernmost Terai districts also experience higher immigration levels. The northern states of India have become one of the most crucial migrant-sending areas to regions of Nepal, and during the last two decades (2011-2021), volume has increased from 4.4 million to 7.1 million. In the same duration, the Indian migration rate has also increased from 17.1 to 24.4 per thousand Nepali people across the districts of Nepal. Indian migrants primarily constitute poor-deprived people from bordering districts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam who migrate for work and employment purposes (NPHC 2021).

Historically, Indo-Nepal migration has been fostered by the First Civil Code of Nepal (1854) by Janga Bahadur Rana. It encouraged Indian migration with the provision that 'foreigners living in Nepal could purchase and sell land' (Subedi, 1991). Further, the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty (1955) elaborates that "inhabitants of both countries be granted equal rights and privileges concerning residency, immigration, property ownership,

and trade and commerce” Further, the Industrial Policy of Nepal (1957) also declared that “no discrimination be made based on nationality, to set up industries in Nepal” has attracted Indian migration to Nepal (Kansakar, 1984). The Nepali government invited Indian businessmen like Birla to establish industries in Nepal, coupled by industrial labourers (Prabhass, 2023). The earlier migration from India was driven by the expansion of the agricultural sector by clearing the dense forests by Indian workers in Southern Terai of Nepal (Mishra & Kunwar, 2020).

The initial wave of immigrants in modern times began with the industrial redevelopment of Nepal (Kumar, 2013). In the latter half of the twentieth century, migration was driven by economic and educational opportunities and the desire to reunite with the families of the early immigrants. The similarity between Indian and Nepali culture fuels the migration as Indian festivals, cuisine, music, dance, and customs have become components of the host society. Nepal’s cultural organisations and community associations have attracted successive Indian migrants (Nayak, 2020). The social, cultural, and economic settings generally vary with the change in national or international boundaries (Shamoun & Van, 2010; Craig, 2015). Cross-border migrant communities typically confront various challenges when migrating to a new country, including language barriers, cultural differences, and the absence of hospitable policies from host nations (Stewart et al., 2015; Togo, 2006). Migrants moving with their families face gender differences, legal protection, and religious freedom (Rasmussen et al., 2012; El Moussaoui & Braster, 2011; Simkhada et al., 2018). Moreover, literature suggests that poor living conditions, a lack of social or legal protection, and inadequate health care are some examples of the social and psychological harassment that takes place as a person crosses an international border and arrives in a new country (Simkhada et al., 2018; Arachchi, 2013). Furthermore, prior research has also highlighted instances of physical and sexual harassment in the host nations, including verbal or nonverbal exploitation; long working hours; workplace torture; etc. (Dahinden, 2016; Joshi et al., 2011; Penninx et al., 2008). Therefore, the lives of cross-border migrants have become a significant area of investigation.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Data source: The primary data was collected from a field survey in Nepal (December 2022 to February 2023) conducted by the researcher to complete his doctoral degree from the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai. The field survey was conducted at Charpane, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur region of Nepal. The selection of location was based on the criteria of the presence of Indian citizens as reported in the Nepal Population and Housing Census. The author took ethical approval (No. IIPS/ACAD/TD/IO-901/2022 on 14-10-2022) from the Institutional Review Board of the International Institute for Population Sciences. The author took written or verbal consent from the respondents before conducting the survey.

3.2. Participants: The study is based on a mixed-method cross-sectional sampling design, covering the factory workers of Charpane VDC (Jhapa district in East Province) and unorganised sector workers of Kathmandu city (Bagmati district in Central province) of Nepal. During field data collection, the snowball sampling technique is used to find Indian migrants working in factories and unorganised sectors in Nepal. The sampling population includes Indian migrants working in Nepali during the survey period. The quantitative survey comprises 390 respondents from brick-kiln, plywood factories at Charpane, and street vendors and shopkeepers in Kathmandu, Nepal. The qualitative survey consists of 18 in-depth interviews (IDI) of the Indian migrants.

3.3. Data collection tools: The Questionnaire was prepared for quantitative data collection, following the WHO guidelines, and translation was made to local languages. A tablet device was used for data collection using “Kobo Toolbox,” - web-based data collection tool. For qualitative information, open-ended and semi-

structured questions were asked, and a Mobile phone was used to record (i.e., Audio recording) the conversation between the interviewer and respondents.

3.4. Operational definition: This study defines Indian migrants as people who have had their place of origin in any state, district, or block of India and have been working in Nepal for at least a month or during the past six months to one year before the survey date.

3.5. Data analysis: The qualitative data analysis includes coding transcriptions from key informant interviews (KII) and in-depth interviews (IDI) for thematic analysis and construction of Word Cloud in NVivo 12 QSR software. Thematic analysis was conducted using (Braun and Victoria, 2006) analysis technique. After the compilation and coding of transcripts from qualitative data, three key themes were identified; (a) Factors influencing the migration of Indian labourers to Nepal (socio-demographic factors, compelling factors, attracting factors, and operational factors), (b) Challenges encountered by labour migrants during normal situations, and (c) Challenges encountered by labour migrants during COVID-19 situation.

4. Results

4.1. Factors influencing the migration of Indian labourers to Nepal

a) Socio-demographic factors

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the labour migrants

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Sample (n)
Age-group	<20 years	9.23	36
	20-40 years	55.13	215
	40-60 years	30	117
	>60 years	5.64	22
Gender	Male	60.26	235
	Female	39.74	155
Education	Below primary	7.98	17
	Primary	22.54	48
	Secondary	26.76	57
	Graduate & others	42.72	91
Marital status	Never married	18.46	72
	Currently married	63.33	247
	Widow/Widower	12.31	48
	Divorced/Separated	5.9	23
Religion	Hindu	76.92	300
	Muslim	15.38	60
	Other	7.69	30
Caste	General	29.23	114
	Scheduled Caste	59.49	232
	Scheduled Tribe	11.28	44
Stay alone	Yes	87.44	341
	No	12.56	49
Total (N)			390

Data Source: Primary data collected through field survey, 2022-23

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of survey respondents based on various background characteristics. The largest age group is 20-40, constituting 55.13% of the labour migrants, followed by the 40-60 age group (30%). The youngest age group (<20) accounts for 9.23%, while the oldest age group (>60) represents 5.64% of the labour migrants. In the gender category, 60.26% of respondents were male, and 39.74% were female labour migrants. The

highest education of the respondents shows that the majority of respondents, 42.72%, are graduates or have attained higher education. Other categories include education levels below primary (7.98%), primary (22.54%), and secondary (26.76%). Marital status depicts the majority of respondents, 63.33%, are currently married. Other categories include never married (18.46%), widow/widower (12.31%), and divorced/separated (5.9%). Religion-wise, it has been found that Hindus are the majority (76.92%), followed by Muslims (15.38%) and other religions (7.69%). The caste distribution indicates that 29.23% belong to the General category, while a significant portion, 59.49%, falls under the Scheduled Caste. Scheduled Tribe constitutes 11.28% of the respondents. Migrants 'Stay Alone' are (87.44%), while a small number of labour migrants (12.56%) reported living with their family.

b) Compelling (push) factors

In-depth interviews (IDI) also depict that the migration of semi-skilled and unskilled workers from India to brick-kiln plywood factories in Nepal stems from a confluence of factors, primarily the "lack of industries" in their home regions. With limited employment prospects locally, people are compelled to seek livelihoods elsewhere, and the plywood industry in Nepal presents an attractive option due to its demand for labour.

A male cook dictates that "There is no plywood factory in our district Jalpaiguri. Further, I do not have agricultural land. Therefore, I migrated to Nepal to work in the factories. Now I am a cook in a factory."

The "absence of siblings" to take care of ageing parents serves as another significant factor influencing migrants to choose a nearby destination, in regions where traditional family structures play a pivotal role in caregiving responsibilities. Due to the absence of siblings, migrant workers feel compelled to support their parents emotionally and financially. In such circumstances, migration to long destinations is generally avoided, and nearby cross-country destinations like plywood factories in Nepal have become a means to secure higher earnings and ensure the support of parents.

A young adult told that "I have been working here for the last twenty years. We are two siblings, and I am the only son of my parents. My sister got married in a faraway district. I work in Nepal, so in case of any emergency, I can look and take care of my parents."

The division of parental property often leaves Indian workers, particularly those from agricultural backgrounds, with a "lack of agricultural land," which traditionally served as their primary source of livelihood. With the fragmentation of landholdings due to inheritance practices, many Indians find themselves with insufficient land to sustain themselves and their families. As a result, people are compelled to seek alternative sources of income, leading them to pursue semi-skilled or unskilled employment opportunities in the factories of Nepal.

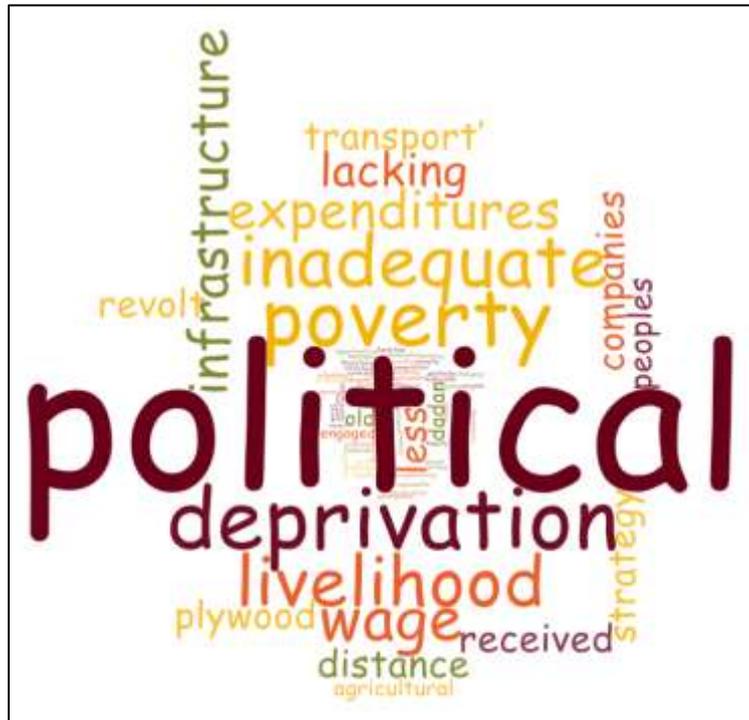
A married couple recites that "After our parents passed away, the property was divided into small pieces, and we were left with household land only. Therefore, without having agricultural work, we pursue unskilled work in brick factories in Nepal."

After compiling the narratives of key informant interviews (KII), the study comes out with four key factors that drive Indian labourers to seek migration to Nepal from the Indian side, like – political unrest situation, poverty, deprivation, and lack of industry and lack of infrastructure.

The supervisor of informal works shared his thoughts that the people of North Bengal are busy making political parties and unions for separate states, and nobody thinks about the means of income to support their families.

The manager has remarked that “the main political unrest situation is concerning around demand for separate states like – Gorkhaland and Kamtapur, and there were revolts in the Northern part of West Bengal” Due to such a crisis, nobody thinks about economic development.

Figure 1: Word cloud on compelling factors of migration



Poor landless people work in the agriculture field during the rainy season and earn little to run their families, but during lean periods, nothing is left to eat, and they seek migration as an alternative for livelihood. Indigenous communities from remote, underdeveloped parts of India are more prone to migration. Such communities generally depend on agricultural work, but land redistribution among siblings has resulted in small landholdings.

The construction worker lamented her situation, “In India, they have a sum of 2 Satak or 0.02-acre land ownership as most of her parental property is divided among five siblings.

Migrants are generally poor and deprived Rajbangsi communities from Assam, Bihar, and West Bengal, with some tribal workers from Odisha and Jharkhand. Poverty is accompanied by deprivation from government initiatives. This does not mean that the number of options is lower in India, but that person/group of people has not received the facility from government providers/stakeholders.

As expressed by the brick-kiln worker, they have not received the benefit of “Awas Yojana – government housing programme” because they were unable to attend political meetings conducted by local political parties, as they were in Nepal, their absence in meeting outcomes to non-beneficiary of government programmes.

The most significant factor in the neoliberal economy is the lack of industry and infrastructure in parts of West Bengal. No work is available in the home districts of India; no plywood companies are there in West Bengal. Additionally, regional disparities in development industries in some pockets snath opportunities for people.

The informal labour shared during his interview that, compared with other places where roads are good, people work in the transport business, i.e., carrying

passengers in local transport- Van, Rikshaw, Toto to earn a livelihood, but places with no proper road infrastructures lack such opportunities.

Additionally, districts of India near the international borders were marginalised; the distance from the capital cities determines the scale of marginalisation for Assam, Bihar, and West Bengal.

The manager of the plywood factory highlighted that at the origin place, there is no work available for people; not a single manufacturing factory is there in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal.

The contractor in the plywood factory also remarked that it is the reluctance from the government side to develop industry and infrastructures; if the plywood companies are set up in northern parts of Bengal and Bihar, then workers will barely migrate to the plywood factories of Nepal.

c) Attracting (pull) factors

Key informant interviews (KII) also elaborate some factors that attract Indian labourers to find employment in Nepal, from the Nepali side, like – demand for skilled labour, higher wages, family legacy, and several job options. Indian workers generally have previous work experience and are skilled in technical compared to Nepali workers.

As highlighted by the plywood factory contractor, Indian workers are very skilled labourers. Moreover, Indians have long experiences working in plywood factories in Haryana and Delhi.

Nepali workers are employed as security guards, transport, managerial posts, and office maintenance workers. Around 90% of the skilled works are managed by Indian labour labourers. Technical skills are weak among Nepal co-workers, and there is a demand for skilled/technical labourers from Indian migrants. The utmost attracting factors, as depicted by the narratives, are higher wages and a high minimum wage rate in Nepal.

The supervisor of informal work stated that the minimum wage for unorganised sector work in Nepal is 45 rupees per hour in Indian currency, and he pointed out the singular aspiration of Indian migrants is higher wages: a monthly 12000 rupees wage for helpers, 17000 rupees wage for Mistri, and a sum of 25000 rupees for supervisor or managerial work in Indian currency.

There is an opportunity for extra income available in Nepal. Labourers do overtime work and earn wages of around 14000 rupees per month. Dadan workers also made bricks beyond their targeted amount. Indian labour migrants with previous migration experience in different Indian states have narrated the higher wages in Nepali factories.

The manager of a plywood factory expressed that hundreds of Indian labourers work in Nepal and receive wages between 500 and 1000 rupees per day, depending on their skill.

Figure 2: Word cloud on attracting factors of migration



Due to the free and open border between India and Nepal, the migration of labourers to either side of the border has become a family legacy. Labourers are migrating to Nepal generations after generations. It has become a “Parampara- pass from ancestor to predecessor.” Nepali owners/employers also prioritise Indian labourers because Indian labourers have been working in Nepal since the establishment of the factory.

Migrants mostly come from nearby bordering districts of Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. However, some migrants come from other states like Assam, Jharkhand, and Odisha. As Nepali factories provide several job options for skilled Indian labourers.

The shopkeeper exchanges her views that once migrants start working in a location, they usually shift their workplaces yearly as several factories are present in Nepal that provide employment to Indian labourers.

Indian labourers work in every square of work, starting from helpers and Managers. Indian workers continuously change their company after working in a factory. The important thing is that several factories are there in Nepal, and it attracts migrants from India for employment.

As reported by labour contractors, labourers do not work repeatedly in a single worksite; every year, they change their worksites. The construction worker stated that he worked in a bilk kiln factory last year, but this year, Dadan was repaid, and now he works as factory labour.

The “availability of Dadan” is a significant factor for Indian workers to pursue cross-border labour migration. Because Dadan money enables labourers to fulfil immediate financial needs at difficult times, this financial assistance often acts as a lifeline during critical times of medical emergencies and children's marriages. By accepting Dadan and migrating to Nepal, workers commit to gradually repaying the advance through their labour.

A Dadan worker lamented that “I have taken Dadan during my wife’s treatment, but my wife is no more. Now me and, my sixteen-year-old daughter and I are working here to repay the advance. We also do overtime as I have to arranged money for my daughter’s marriage”

The wage difference between India and Nepal plays a pivotal role in driving migration to Nepal for employment in brick kiln and plywood factories. Nepalese plywood factories' comparatively higher wages attract semi-skilled and unskilled workers who often face low-paying or unstable job opportunities in their home regions.

A female helper said “Our whole family must work to eliminate poverty, and that is why we migrate to Nepal. Nepal has comparatively higher wages for brick-making than for the tea garden work of Assam”

For Indian migrants, the proximity of Nepal to their home emerges as a primary reason for choosing Nepal as a migration destination. The geographical closeness of Nepal leads to easy travel and makes migration easy compared to long-distance destinations.

A helper boy told that “We are from the opposite side of the border; it takes around two to three hours to reach home. Our parents used to work here; and we came with them.”

d) Operational factors

The current study unveiled from key informant interviews (KII) that the most influencing operational factor is migration through contractors. The primary role of the contractor is to bring labourers to Nepal's factories. At the same time, many Indian citizens approach such contractors with the hope of eliminating poverty. Contractors either take migrants to Nepal and provide them with job roles for regular wages, or sometimes contractors provide ‘Dadan’ to the citizens and later bring them to work in Nepal.

As articulated by a factory worker, his whole family works in a factory, and contractors usually bring them from India. Labour contractors dominate them while working in factories in Nepal.

Further, narratives express that Contractors also act as a channel at the grassroots level. Labour contractor has described the India-Nepal migration through “Thikadar – clients of the contractor” and “Sardar – agents of the contractor at the village level.” To facilitate the operation of migration, the contractor provides financial aid ‘Dadan’ to labourers generally in challenging conditions of labourers and drive them to seek migration.

A Dadan worker in a brick factory noted that a contractor hired him. Firstly, they took some Pesci/Dadan for the daughters’ marriage, and now their whole family work in a brick factory to repay the advance money.

Word of mouth or a network of peers provides information to labourers about good earning opportunities in Nepal.

As told by an informal worker, they migrate to Nepal with the help of a friend, who provides them accommodation, job roles, and food during the initial days.

Figure 3: Word cloud on the operational factors of migration

houses. Access to amenities like electricity, light, beds, and kitchens is relatively common, while very few have fans and cooking gas connections.

A plywood factory worker shared her harrowing experience: “I reside with five other female workers in a fifty square feet room, with minimum ventilation and light.”

Narratives also show the precarious condition of labour migrants working in informal sectors of Nepal, generally encountering difficulties in accommodation, drinking water shortage, food, healthcare access, harassment, and sanitation. In the initial days of migration, migrants spent a lot of money on stay and food during normal times. Even the owners employing domestic workers did not care about the stay and accommodation of labour migrants.

As lamented by construction labour, “I first came to Nepal as a housemaid with my friends, during that time I had to spend five thousand rupees to get a rent room, and fourteen thousand rupees to purchase kitchen materials.”

Basic facilities and civic amenities are not available in factory worker camps in Nepal. Female labour migrants significantly encounter privacy-related challenges during their normal stay in such worker camps in Nepal.

One brick-kiln Dadan worker shared her poignant experience: “I work in a brick-kiln factory, few worker camps are made by laying bricks one on another, to accommodate the female migrants. In addition to unhygienic food prepared in mess, drinking water is also not of good quality; we used to boil the water to drink.”

Indian labour migrants also encounter difficulty in seeking healthcare services during normal stays in Nepal. Indian labour migrants sometimes return to Indian hospitals to seek healthcare at very low cost or free of cost, by compromising their work and wages.

Dadan, a worker in a brick kiln factory, said teary-eyed, “While working in the making factory, my son was attacked by Epilepsy. Neither company nor contractor helps us with medical care; we visit Siliguri (India) every 20 days for his treatment.”

Due to improper recruitment and lack of documentation, the employers of Nepal are not solely responsible for the lack of health care services. However, employers do help Indian labour migrants with medical care to maintain human rights and holistic solidarity.

The manager of the plywood factory also shared his views that “In case of any major accident at the workplace, the owner is not responsible for medical expenses. But the company bears medical costs on request, because workers are neither registered in Nepal nor have any job contracts.”

Further, due to the absence of any intra-government Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) to validate health-seeking cards between the two countries, the India-Nepal open border and friendship treaty is invalid for health-seeking service of labour migrants of both countries.

Construction labour exchanged his views that “I have made all the necessary cards required to get the benefit (like- Swastha Sathi for health care, and eShram card for medical insurance of labour) of Indian government schemes. But these cards are invalid & did not provide any benefits in Nepal.”

Harassments by contractors and employers to labour migrants is a usual practice in Nepal during normal situations. Indian labour migrants, especially females, were verbally harassed in informal and factory work. Local people perceive Indian labour migrants as a threat to Nepal’s politics and economy. The hilly people often use scornful words to humiliate the Indian labour migrants and the Terai people of Nepal.

As expressed by construction labour, “I belong to the Musahar caste of Bihar, working here as a helper in the construction works. Local workers often taunt us with offensive and taunting words.”

Physical and mental harassment are also reported during normal stays of labour migrants. Such harassment situations trigger quarrels. Indian labour migrants usually endure harassment when the Manager, Supervisor, and the Thikadars coerce harassment. Work and payment-related difficulties are also reported during normal stays of labour migrants. Nepali owners often demanded bribes to employ a labour migrant for a higher rank position.

As reported by the manager of a plywood factory, “I was trying to get a labour welfare job in a cement factory, and I clear all the requirements. Despite the company asking me to pay 20 thousand rupees for that post, I could not afford the money.”

Dadan workers were often treated as enslaved people, and as of debt bondage, such workers in the brick kiln factory were overburdened with targets.

As highlighted by Dadan, a worker in a brick kiln factory, “We work around 16 hours daily. The supervisor asks us to complete 2000 bricks, which is often miscounted. Supervisor ends up with very low wages to our hand after deducing amount bricks set for Dadan work target.”

In normal situations, labour migrants cannot get rid of petty crimes in Nepal. After receiving wages for work, labour migrants are sending money to home. As sometimes the local co-workers often robbed labour migrants at the workplace or during return journeys. Saving money in hands and carrying cash to home during return journeys, were extremely vulnerable. As incidences has come out that labour migrants were attacked and ruined by pickpockets and snatchers at the currency exchange points of the India-Nepal border.

One plywood factory worker recounted his friend's harrowing experience, “My friend was travelling back home after one year; He was followed by some pickpockets; they were friendly at the beginning and offered water to drink, something was mixed with that water that made him unconscious, and culprits has robbed him.”

4.3. Challenges encountered by labour migrants during COVID-19 situation

During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown situations, Indian labour migrant labourers in Nepal have faced challenges that are no less than normal situations. However, the severity of COVID-19 challenges was more vulnerable, like – lack of food and quarantine facilities, lack of medical facilities for infected people, harassment in the form of – alienation of migrants by indicating them bearers of the virus, and delayed repatriation, despite all possible safety measures taken by the Indian government. Labour migrants did not get proper accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with violation of COVID protocols.

One worker of a plywood factory shared his harrowing experience: “Each person is supposed to get one single room for quarantine, but the company did not arrange any separate room. We stayed in the overcrowded room, with some of our roommates having symptoms of COVID infection and high fever.”

Some labourers, who prioritise the health and wellbeing of the family, took rented houses outside the work premises to keep their family members safe from the deadliest virus.

The supervisor of the informal works said, “I took a rented house on the outskirts of the industrial area of Jhapa. Our whole family still lives there, with a monthly rent of around 2500 rupees.”

Like normal situations, labour migrants also encountered food challenges and lack of food – a basic human need during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal. With increasing cases of infected people, the Nepali government also imposed a lockdown, resulting in a complete shutdown of manufacturing works. Indian labour migrants “who cannot return to India,” got stacked in the factory worker camps. As evident, factory owners with no manufacturing work did not care much about the labourers and did not spend much on labourers to feed them free of cost.

Dadan worker from a plywood factory recalled her poignant experience: “During COVID-19 and lockdown situation, the company was completely shut down. Most of the Indian labour migrants cannot return to India due to the closure of the international border. However, factory owners provided us only one-time food, which was not enough for us; we generally used to starve for the rest of the day.”

The informal labour also shared, “During the lockdown situation, we were stacked in Nepal, food was sometimes arranged by contributing from our savings, and sometimes the company provided us with food. Each labour migrant spent most of their savings taking food from the hotels during the lockdown period.”

Indian labour migrants, during normal situations, are unable to receive free/low-cost medical facilities from Nepali healthcare providers, and the COVID-19 pandemic itself is a health emergency. As a result, labour migrants from India encounter public health vulnerability. In addition, safety protocols for COVID-19 were not followed accurately in Nepal's workplaces.

Dadan labour from the brick kiln factory shared during her interview that, “During the initial days of the pandemic, no treatment was given to infected labourers, and we were forced to work to complete target sets to repay Dadan by making bricks.”

For Corona virus testing, Nepali diagnostic centres charge enormous amounts, while for Nepali residents, coronavirus testing is free in hospitals as they are citizens of Nepal.

The plywood factory manager articulated, “The Quarantine stays for COVID-positive patients were also chargeable for Indians.”

Instances of pathetic situations of Indian labour migrants are also highlighted through peer migrants.

A labour contractor of a plywood factory shared from his memory that, “After the first lockdown, many Indian labourers have gone back to India, and without money in their hands, labourers were exhausted sleeping at the footpaths near the India-Nepal border, waiting for the opening of the international border to return home.”

Unlike the harassment during normal situations, labour migrants from India have encountered challenges of lack of accommodation, food, and medical facilities; Indian labour migrants were with alienation by Nepali citizens.

The shopkeeper recalled that “As we are migrants from India, and COVID cases in India reported to Nepal. So, local people treated as the bearer of the virus, and they treat outsiders as a threat to their community.”

In the name of COVID-19 protocol, security personnel of factories used to harass the Indian labourers physically.

As remarked by a plywood worker, “Usually body temperature was measured with a gun-shaped infrared thermometer – that measure temperature from a distance. However, when a female labourer reported any fever symptoms, security personnel touched the body of the female labour by saying that, they are confirming the fever, as the thermometer may not be working properly.”

The circumstances of harassment were overwhelming for the Dadan workers. Although factories were closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown, Dadan labourers were still working in factories.

As expressed by labour, “The factory was closed due to the impact of the pandemic, but the contractor asked us to make a heap of bricks.”

4.4. Authors observation at destination

The author observes that in Nepal, most labour camps are typically enclosed to workplaces, surrounded by boundary walls, and secured by iron gates. Workplaces provide basic amenities for workers, including toilets. Additionally, facilities for rented housing are available near the factory premises, allowing non-working family members to live on-site. Cooks were there, serving food three times a day. Cameras were installed in workplaces to monitor labour migrants. The scenario reflects the effort of Nepali employers to provide affordable living conditions and full utilisation of the workforce, but it has constrained the wellbeing of migrants in Nepal.

5. Discussion

5.1. Factors Driving Indian Migration to Nepal

The current research shows a significant number of Indian citizens migrate to Nepal are mostly belong to less educated, poor socio-economic profile, and socially backward groups, and more female migrants were observed in the 26-40 age group, depicted in Section 4.1a. Earlier literatures also suggest a significant people took migration decision under the grim umbrella of family poverty, backwardness, marginalisation, and with aspiration of upward social mobility to come out of poverty (Kirti, 2021; Sarkar & Mishra, 2021). As observed in Section 4.1b, main compelling (push) factors from the Indian side are poverty, lack of industry and agricultural lands, absence of siblings, and political unrest situation. Earlier studies also aligning with the datum that, poverty in India is the outcome of lack of agricultural land due to the bifurcation of parental property leads to the non-availability of agricultural work for villagers (Pandey et al., 2021; Sarkar, 2021). The absence of industrial interventions in northern Indian states, especially in North Bengal, resulted in scarcity of employment. Prior study also established that, landlessness and poverty are ongoing perilous factors that compel people to search for alternate livelihood strategies outside for personal development (Sarkar, 2021; Skeldon, 2014; Breman, 1996; Mazumdar, 2014). Poverty and deprivation go hand in hand because migrants report how their survival for migration leads to absence at the place of origin and prevents them from receiving government assistance (De Haan, 1999; Betts, 2013).

On the other hand, Section 4.1c highlights significant attracting (pull) factors from Nepali side are demand for skilled labour, higher wages, family legacy, and job opportunities. Recent studies on labour force and wages depicts that demand for skilled labour is the primary driver of migration not only in developing country, but in developed country too some factory jobs required technical skills. Such a demand for skilled labour, leading to higher wages for skilled/technical workers when hired from outside the state (Oliinyk et al., 2021; Amornkitvikai et al., 2023). Wages in a destination country often vary depending on the type of work, as a particular job pay more in destination than in the home country (Lim, 2019; Silvey and Parreñas, 2020). Furthermore, the singular aspiration of international labour migrants is to ‘work and earning,’ and workers put in extra hours (overtime) provides labour migrant an additional income (Aslam & Husain, 2019; Anxo & Karlsson, 2019). In the post-colonial era, the new states formation and sectoral development has created distinct migration pattern attributed to proximity of nations. And neighbouring regions maintained the legacy ‘Parampara’ of migration through ancestral ties (Vandenhelsken, 2021; Clifford, 2020; Joji, 2022; Borah & Utter, 2023). Prior studies also affirm that, labour migrants in an industrial environment switch occupation, due to the

presence of a wide range of low and semi-skill employment opportunities (Kelley et al., 2020; Choithani et al., 2021). Prior studies on India-Nepal relation established the fact that, the connection of attracting factors of India labour migration to Nepal is deeply rooted in the history of colonisation. During colonial rule, Britishers boosted Indian labour migration through the Sagauli Treaty, the Friendship Act, the Civil Code of Nepal, and the Industrial Policy of Nepal (Mukharji & Mukharji, 2006; Kushwah & Anand, 2022; Kansakar, 2003).

In section 4.1d, current study suggests that Dadan, contractors, word-of-mouth, referrals, and proximity are playing essential role in the operation of labour migration from India to Nepal. Dadan is usually provided by contractors and dadan workers work under a particular contractor only. Studies on labour migration in India upholds the role of 'Dadan' as an operational factor for migration (Acharya, 2021). Contractor formulates a network of individuals as 'Thikadar & Sardar' responsible for distributing 'Dadan' and bringing labourers to workplace (Sarkar, 2021; Maskara, 2024; Barman & Roy, 2019). Word-of-mouth and referral also have influence on the operation of migration. Earlier studies finds that occasionally intrapersonal information sharing and recommendations through friends and family members encourage potential migrants to seek migration as a strategy of livelihood existence (Dhillon et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2022). The proximity of Nepal and India is a significant migration operational factor for Indo-Nepal migration, as highlighted by several studies (Thapliyal, 1999; Subedi, 1991; Sharma et al., 2014; Timalsina, 2022), assisted by Free and open border agreement (Saqib et al., 2019).

The current study shows that migration occurs due to a combination of compelling (push), attracting (pull), and operational factors. Findings are aligning with previous studies, alludes to poverty, lack of resources as a significant compelling factor of migration (Sharma et al., 2015; Bellampalli & Yadava, 2024). While, the demand for skilled labour with higher wages as an attracting factor is in contradiction with earlier studies conducted on Nepali workers migrating to India (Shrestha, 2017; Datta, 2002; Kirti, 2021; Thapliyal, 1999). At the same time, few studies support available opportunities i.e., business opportunity in Nepal (Seddon et al., 1998) and family legacy drive Indian people to Nepal (Paudel & Devkota, 2018). Hein de Haas's migration theory (2021) mentioned, 'Migration is a function of facilities available at the place of destination and migrant's capabilities to earn and remit to home' (De Haas, 2021). On a broader perspective, the Global Compact for Migration aims to improve and empower labour migrants by ensuring access to accurate information about rights and legal protections. However, many labour migrants still lack this crucial information, leaving Indian labourers vulnerable to precarious working conditions in Nepal. Therefore, considering the goals of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), the following section examines the precarity of workers in normal circumstances as well as the difficulties faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.2. Pre-post COVID challenges in the light of GCM

The GCM directs that 'all dimensions of international migration should be addressed holistically and comprehensively by intergovernmental negotiations, to achieve Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration' (Raleigh, 2021). However, Indian labourers migrating to Nepal are already burdened with economic and political vulnerability; upon reaching Nepali factories to seek employment, labour migrants are further burdened with housing, healthcare, harassment, bondage labour, bribes, and robbery incidences Section 4.2. Initial accommodation insecurity is a significant issue that worsens the precarity of Indian labour migrants in Nepal. Labour migrants often had to deal with high initial costs to purchase room and kitchen utensils; further, tiny, and crowdedness poses unhealthy ambience. The current study shows that, Indian labour migrants fall short of protection and support in Nepal, as the recruitment process is through contractors. Prior studies evidently present that open border and leads to non-delivering of free services to other country citizen (Castelli, 2018).

In normal situation Indian labour migrants encounters harassments in the form of physical and mental harassment. Existing literature on migrants at destination are peril to harassment (Vijay, 2015; Singh & Basu, 2020). Moreover, 'Dadan' increase the risks of labourers fall into the trap of poverty and bondage work, making it impossible to came out from the vicious cycle of debt trap and precarious working condition. Earlier studies also highlighted enormous narratives regarding the operation of migration, reflecting the enabling possibility of advance payment to precarious labour conditions through debt bondage and poverty trap (Ghosh, 2009; Sarkar & Mishra, 2021) Indian labourers in Nepal, during normal times, reported financial exploitation in the form of bribery, overwork, robbery, and wage theft. Earlier studies also show that wage theft was a recurring issue in destinations with overburden of work, demanding bribery for higher posts, and are often robbed (Saha, 2024; Foley & Nicola, 2021).

Similarly, current study also shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic labour migrants encountered severe food shortages, lack of quarantine facilities, high medical costs, sexual harassments Section 4.3. Labour migrants often survived on a single meal in a day, by expending their own savings. Studies on lockdown situations also show that starvation became an issue for most of the informal labour migrants during the COVID-19. Virus-infected workers were not given any separate rooms, and many were forced accommodate in labour camp only. Recent studies show that the lack of adequate space for isolation further exacerbated COVID-19 vulnerability among labour migrants in developing countries (Jesline et al., 2021). Sexual harassment also became a serious issue, especially for female labour migrants to measure fever during the pandemic. Studies also reported sexual harassments during COVID-19 time (Puri & John, 2007). During the pandemic time wage theft has also happened, migrants received no payment and were asked to return to India. While, with restricted formal border crossings, many migrants sought illegal border crossings by paying exorbitant fee to intermediaries. Recent studies also depict exploitation faced by labour migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic related to wage theft and pathetic return journeys (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). Labour migrants were also alienated by locals as virus bearer, and labourers were overcharged for diagnosis and treatment in Nepal. Recent studies also suggest the harassment escalated to accusations of being virus carriers at various destinations around the World (Bayu, 2021).

The author's observations Section 4.4 depict migration as being driven by a combination of attractive and compelling factors, such as the layout of labour camps, food, dynamic workforce, variations in working conditions, and the function of contractors or middlemen. In general, attracting factors outweigh compelling factors as labour contractors strategically promote appealing factors and inspire individuals to migrate (Mohamed & Abdul, 2020; Beverelli, 2022; Van Hear et al., 2020). Other key responsibilities suggested by GCM involves the practical logistics of migration. Like: states should ensure the prevention of labour migration, migrants should not be charged with recruitment fees. In case of emergency, migrants should be provided with transportation and easy repatriation safely and efficiently. Still, there is no intergovernmental dialogue on provision of Global Compact for Migration for essential services between India and Nepal to ensure the prevention of labour migration by offering favourable solutions; instead, territorial disputes on border demarcation 'Kalapani' is prevailing between India and Nepal (Nayak, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The study explores several attractive factors that captivate Indian labour migration to Nepal, as findings highlight that Indian workers are known for good technical skills. Experienced labourers were highly sought in plywood and brick kiln factories in Nepal. Previous studies also suggest Indians looking for skilled migration mainly to developed countries, also called "brain drain" in some studies. However, semi-skilled labour migrants from India often dominate the technical roles of developing country industries. Scanty studies are conducted on Indian labour migration to other developing countries. However,

a study conducted by Nepali scholars suggests (54.3 per cent vs 7.3 per cent) a difference between Indian and local citizens' technical skills, and Indian labour migrants enjoy job mobility options in various factories in Nepal (Bhatt, 2023). Higher wages in Nepal for unorganised sectors make it an attractive destination for Indian migrants, sometimes surpassing wages offered in some states of India. Bhatt's study also suggests that the higher wages earned by Indian labour migrants in Nepal reflect the skill differences among workers in developing countries. The free and open border between the two countries further facilitates migration; without much documentation like a visa, labourers choose to migrate to Nepal for skilled and better work with a higher payment. Studies conducted in western Nepal suggest that the border between India and Nepal facilitates people and logistic transport easily with no/minimum testimonial, creating opportunities for labourers.

Prior study also emphasises the intricate interplay between cross-border mobility and the non-availability of employment opportunities (Butler, 2018; Kumar, 2013). Moreover, the literature also highlights a unique feature that, usually the oil boom in the Middle East attracted most of its working-age population of Nepal migrated to Gulf countries, while numerous Nepalis also migrated to India and various destinations as restaurant and hospitality workers (Mishra & Kunwar, 2020). And Indian migrants are filling the 'void of workers' is created in the semi-skilled industrial workforce of Nepal (Sinha, 2015). The current study aligns with prior research that migration occurs due to a combination of push, pull, intervening obstacles, and personal factors. Landless, indigenous, and vulnerable communities of India work as agricultural labour during the rainy season, but during lean times people migrate elsewhere to work in factories for informal labour. From the Indian side, poverty plays a vital role owing to the lack of landholdings and deprivation (Deshingkar, 2010; Joe et al., 2009). Further, the labourers are under dual marginalisation due to political unrest and lack of infrastructure. Furthermore, there were fewer employment opportunities due to the erratic political realm and stagnant political outlook; because of this quagmire, low- and semi-skilled labourers were obliged to migrate across borders (Sarkar, 2017). North and eastern states' lack of infrastructure development (manufacturing or production industries and a reluctance to build or repair transportation infrastructure) marginalises India's bordering districts. In the neoliberal globalised world, migration, and development in the global south impact Indo-Nepal labour migration (Sinha, 2015; Mukarji & Mukharji, 2006). However, development in capital or some pockets of a region reflects the exclusion of marginalised bordering areas from territorial growth. People feel neglected, which propels labourers to migrate to nearby prosperous areas (Samaddar and Sengupta eds., 2019; Weiner, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2008).

On an important note, migration from India to Nepal is framed as an opportunity rather than a problem in the context of employment-seeking from the bordering states of India. Addressing the structural gaps is vital in strengthening the wellbeing of migrants from India to Nepal. Furthermore, the study highlighted the positive contribution of Indian migrants to Nepal's economy, emphasising the multifaceted nature of migration dynamics. There is a need for mutual provision regarding basic amenities, health care and security from both governments. Further, recognition of streamlined processes for industrial development is required in the northern states of India. Migration across borders is like two sides of a coin; some see migration as a threat to the political stability and general wellbeing of the host nation, but others also acknowledge that adequate immigration circulation and integration can contribute significantly to the economic advancement of the destination nation (Tsuda, 2012; Acharya, 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2022).

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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