

Research Paper v

KAMAUNE

The Cultural and Economic Imaginarities of Migration

Gaurab KC



Centre for the Study of
Labour and Mobility

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Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility

Social Science Baha

345 Ramchandra Marg, Battisputali, Kathmandu – 9, Nepal

Tel: +977-1-4472807, 4480091 • Fax: +977-1-4475215

info@ceslam.org • www.ceslam.org

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Abstract

A large number of Nepalis have flown to the Gulf countries and countries in East and Southeast Asia for employment, leaving their primary kin members at home. This paper attempts to understand the rationale for out-migration from the vantage point of those 'left behind' primarily kin members, regarding the ones 'who left' – the migrants. This study is primarily based on the findings of a three-month-long fieldwork, conducted in 2009, in Gwaldaha of Chalnakhel Village Development Committee in Kathmandu District. The research explores and analyses various dimensions of male out-migration from the perspective of the Gwaldaha community. Despite varied life histories and experiences, the majority of the villagers indicated that a family member's decision to migrate was tied to the notion of *kamauna*, meaning 'to earn'. *Kamauna* is an economic term, but it holds a distinct multifaceted cultural meaning in the context of local households and the socio-cultural milieu of Gwaldaha, whereby *kamaune*, the act of earning, is imbued with present needs and future dreams. This study unravels this vernacular notion, comprised of multiple meanings in the context of my research.

Key Words: Migration, out-migration, labour out-migration, mobility, *kamauna*, *kamaune*, household, migration communities, human agency.

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INTRODUCTION¹

Every day, the international airport in Kathmandu is crowded with a large number of Nepalis queuing to fly to different destinations abroad. Among them, those destined for the Persian Gulf region and countries in East and Southeast Asia as migrant workers can easily be identified. They usually flock together, many dressed in similar T-shirts and/or caps with the name of a foreign company or the recruitment agency on them, brandishing their passports and tickets, faces reflecting a grim smile laced with traces of excitement and anxiety, with the staff of recruitment agencies counselling them about their travel. Most migrants only receive their documents, including passports, air tickets and contracts, at the airport – just before departure. They heave a sigh of relief only when the agents/recruitment agencies convince them that everything is going perfectly as planned and in order.

A sizeable section of the crowd surrounding the said flock of migrants comprises of their relatives who have come to see them off. They stand on the sidelines and can be seen adorning the migrants with garlands and sometimes sobbing. Such regular sightings at the airport instigated me to probe into not only the reason behind this out-migration but also how members of the migrants' families, the 'left behind', perceive the migrants' decision to leave. The aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of 'why they go?' from the perspectives of those who stay behind.

There are various theoretical frameworks which explain the causes of migration. Individual decisions and structural changes, among others, are some of the key factors. However, there is a scarcity of literature on migration that considers the households or families, the 'left behind', as a major unit of analysis, even though, those 'left behind' are as involved in and affected by the migration

1 This paper, based on a chapter of my MA thesis submitted to the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, was presented at the conference 'Migration in Nepal' organised by the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM), Social Science Baha, on 23 April, 2012. I am grateful to CESLAM for selecting this paper for publication, and owe my heartfelt thanks to Amrita Limbu, Prakash Luitel, Dan V. Hirslund, Karen Valentine, Bandita Sijapati, Deepak Thapa and everyone at CESLAM for reading it and providing invaluable suggestions for improving it.

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process as the migrants themselves.² As Osella and Gardner (2004) point out, much attention has already been focused on those who leave, with little or no effort to incorporate the views of those left behind:³

We know that people are on the move, but still have little detailed ethnography concerning the effects this has on local areas or individual lives. Indeed, there has been a startlingly ‘northern’ bias in much research, whilst focusing largely upon the places which ‘receive’ overseas migrants and where diasporic communities are constituted (in Europe and North America in particular), generally has little to say about the places which they left behind.

Evidently, an individual’s imagination of migration is shaped by various underlying cultural and economic factors. This study considers the family as a *sine qua non* in the overall mobility process and explores the reasons for migration from the vantage point of those ‘left behind’. In line with Osella and Gardner (2004), it attempts to uncover some of the cultural and economic motivations that influence out-migration from the perspective of the family members, particularly female household members. Such people comprise a part of, what I refer to as, ‘migration communities’ – where out-migration is central to the community’s economy and its sustenance. The perceptions of these migration communities provide invaluable insights into understanding migration from Nepal.

In this study, *kamaune*, a local notion that falls within the tradition of anthropology, is studied extensively along with all its cultural nuances. The term *kamaune* carries distinct meanings which can only be understood within the local cultural matrix. *Kamaune* is not an oppositional category of spending; on the contrary it is a relational category to spending. *Kamaune* persist because one has to spend for present needs and future aspirations, for household activities, ritual performances, societal honour, healthcare, education and also to retain a male identity. Though *kamaune* has always existed in the day-to-day parlance and is highly embedded in the action of the human agency,⁴ it is largely

2 See Massey 1990

3 Osella and Gardner 2004, xi

4 I am using human agency here as explained by Shah (Shah 2004, 2): ‘Human agency is used here as the capacity of the individuals to author social action that has consequence and meaning

overlooked in Nepali migration discourses. I hope this ethnographic study will fill this lacuna to some extent.

both for themselves and others. While people exist within historically evolved socio-political structures, the idea of agency implies that agents are aware of their intentions and the choices between different courses of action. It is within the indeterminate structural spaces that human actors can improvise and devise their agency to deal with the contingent challenges and opportunities.'

METHODOLOGY

This study, which is focussed exclusively on external migration, is based on an ethnography of Gwaldaha in Chalnakhel Village Development Committee (VDC) in Kathmandu District conducted over a period of three months. As McHugh highlights, the significance of ethnographies is that they ‘reveal lived experiences embedded within socio-cultural contexts, constituting what the anthropologist Geertz (1973) terms an interpretive science in search of meaning rather than an experimental science in search of law.’⁵ I have relied on ethnography in an attempt to capture the lived experiences of the non-migrant family members, as well as, returnees in order to interpret their perceptions and understandings of this *kamaune* notion.

Participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and narratives are the primary tools used in this study. The ethnographic account was drawn by engaging with the community in different activities. I spent my days requesting the respondents to recount the entire process of migration of their family members. Some of these conversations occurred at the respondents’ houses where I was able to observe the family as they went about their daily tasks, the wives of migrants hustling to send their children to school in the mornings, well-placed photographs of the migrant on the walls of the houses, songs about separation as their cellphone ringtones, frequent exchanges of missed calls between the women and their migrant husbands during the conversation, and the families’ long wait to receive the remitted money.

I talked with a number of people during my fieldwork but I can count 31 of them as my primary informants, whom I met several times and spent hours conversing with, both in formal and informal settings. Of these 31, 17 belonged to households with a migrant member abroad, eight were male migrant returnees and six were local villagers (two of them females) who had a good understanding of the village and were familiar with the social and cultural setting of the village.

5 McHugh 2000, 72

THE SETTING: MAPPING THE VILLAGE AND THE PEOPLE

Gwaldaha is a small village located 9 km south of Kathmandu's Old Bus Park. The village is bordered by the Bagmati River in the east, Hattiban forest in the west, Kirtipur municipality in the north, and Setidevi VDC in the south. It is an hour-long bus ride from the Old Bus Park to Chalnakhel bus stop and from there Gwaldaha is a short walk away. Another option is to take a bus to Khokana or Bungamati in Lalitpur district, and then walk over the Bagmati bridge that connects Gwaldaha with Lalitpur.

The settlement in Gwaldaha is a bit scattered, with houses that are mostly cemented, some in the rural style with sloped tile or tin roofs. People in Gwaldaha are an admixture of different caste and ethnic groups, namely, Bahun, Chhetri, Magar, Newar, Tamang, Nagarkoti, and Dalits (Pariyar, Nepali and Bishwokarma), with Chhetris constituting the largest proportion. People are engaged in a variety of occupations, ranging from agriculture, and daily wage labour to business, service, and foreign employment. Due to its proximity to Kathmandu, the village is well connected with the urban economy of the capital and the villagers depend upon it for education and professional work. Nepali is the lingua franca of communication in the public domain, while Tamang is also spoken by the Tamangs.

According to the elderly of the village, the first settlers in the village were from the Nagarkoti community, many of whom work as masons. Other caste and ethnic groups have a more recent history in Gwaldaha, of around a hundred years. The history of Gwaldaha is one of in-migration, but out-migration is not a new phenomenon either. Some male members of the Nagarkoti households recounted the migration of their ancestors to India. However, out-migration to the Gulf and Malaysia for employment is a much more recent phenomenon.

Out-migration from Gwaldaha increased concurrently with the general pattern in the country. In the early 1990s, there were only a few youths in the village who had gone to the Gulf countries for employment, but the trend has since increased drastically. It is also worth noting that migration for labour from Gwaldaha occurs among all classes, as well as, all caste and ethnic groups.

In the words of Laxman,⁶ an elderly local:

Compared to the old days, the number of people going to *bidesh* [foreign lands] is increasing every day here. Humans always possess a strong desire to increase their property. Everybody wants to lead a comfortable life, buy land, build an attractive house, purchase a car, be able to spend lavishly on weddings and other ceremonies. All of these require money. You cannot find many opportunities here to earn [*kamauna*] because we don't have enough factories and industries here. The salary you receive here is insufficient. The only real alternative to farming is to go to *bidesh*. When people come back after working for four or five years in *bidesh*, you can see that they have made a lot of progress compared to where they were prior to migration. They bring back cash and spend on many things. The youth are especially influenced by the changed lifestyle of the migrant returnees. Migration has benefitted our country. We must be thankful to the foreigners for providing jobs to so many Nepalis. Rather than staying here doing nothing, it is better to go to *bidesh* to earn.

Thus, out-migration from Gwaldaha for employment has strong economic bearings that are rooted in the idea of *kumaune* in *bidesh*.

6 Names of all the respondents have been altered to maintain anonymity.

KAMAUNE AS AN IDEAL

In recent years, migration to the Gulf countries and Malaysia has emerged as a neo-cultural trend, particularly from developing countries of South Asia, like Nepal, where there are limited opportunities available to make a living. In fact, out-migration is increasingly becoming a primary means for households to fulfil their economic and socio-cultural needs.

Due to the persistence of division of labour, males are expected to be the bread-earners in the family. *Kamaune* is associated almost exclusively with the male members. Consequently, the men feel that it is their responsibility to provide for their household, and meet the financial needs of their parents, wife and children. This idea is culturally ingrained to the point where being able to provide for their families is directly correlated to the male members' prestige in the society. Thus, they aspire to *kamauna* and in the absence of alternative options locally develop an urge to migrate to be able to do so. Therefore, who the *kamaune* members are is predetermined, and migration is a prime option for these individuals. This option when chosen, leads to mobility of the individual.

In response to the question, '*Waha kina bidesinu bhako?*' (Why did he migrate to foreign lands?), the most common answer I received from the majority of respondents was '*kamauna*' (to earn). Evidently, the main reason behind male migration from the perspective of Gwaldaha's residents is rooted in the notion of *kamaune*.

The term used in the authoritative *Nepali Brihat Sabdakosh* (Nepali Comprehensive Dictionary)⁷ to describe the act of earning is *kamaunu*, which the dictionary defines as:

- i) *Chal ya achal sampati jamma garnu; Aarjan wa uparjan garnu; kamai garnu; Aarjinu* (to collect fixed or moveable assets; acquire or to produce; to make earnings; to earn).
- ii) *Khet wa barima bali lagai bhogchalan garnu* (to cultivate land).
- iii) *Suun, chadi aadi dhatu lai gabana ma parinat garnu* (to make ornaments of metals such as of gold and silver).

7 Nepal Pragya Pratisthan 2067 BS, 188

- iv) *Barsai pichhe bali varne gari damaile luga siune, kami le hatiyar banaune aadi kaam garnu* (tailors stitching clothes, blacksmiths making weapons, etc every year, in exchange for an annual share of crops).

There is, however, no mention of the word *kamaune* (the one who earns) in the dictionary. *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of Nepali Language* defines the word *kamaune* as ‘industrious; earning; one who earns.’⁸ Colloquially, the process or action of *kamauna* is called *kamaune*. *Kamaune* can be used as a verb as well as an adjective. *Kamaune* denotes the action where in an individual engages or participates in any kind of earning activity. It can also be used as a descriptive adjective in denoting the individual who is doing the earning (i.e., *kamaune manche* or the bread-earner). However, in the context of Gwaldaha, based on the answers I received from my respondents, *kamauna* strictly means to earn money in order to possess wealth and prestige.

While *kamaune* at first glance appears to be a straight-forward economic term, it holds an equally distinct and multifaceted meaning in the local household and socio-cultural milieu of Gwaldaha, as will be explained in the following sections. It is important to note that in Nepal the primary responsibility of earning and accumulating money falls on the shoulders of male members of the household.

As Osella and Osella (2000) point out:

Cash is an important sign of success and masculinity: a man is someone with liquidity, not just assets. Holding land and owning property is important, but so too is command over cash, and wealth is a central requirement in most styles of masculinity.⁹

Thus, while the ability or inability of men to provide for their family has been tied to their dignity and social standing in society, more recently, these provisions have also come to include liquid money or specifically cash.

Naam Kamaune and Daam Kamaune

As mentioned above, the idea of *kamaune* is an integral part of the social and cultural milieu of Nepali society, with two types of worldviews on *kamaune*: i)

8 Turner and Turner 2007, 75

9 Osella and Osella 2000, 120

naam kamaune (earning name and fame), and ii) *daam kamaune* (earning money), with the two being interlinked in many ways. These notions of *naam kamaune* and *daam kamaune* are closely associated with Shah's (2004) descriptions of the concept of memoreality and *naam rakhne* (name keeping).¹⁰ He illustrates these concepts by giving an example of the renowned Nepali poet Bhanu Bhakta.¹¹

In one of his best known autobiographical verses, 19th century Nepali poet Bhanubhakta Acharya draws out the essence of memoreality from its folk roots. In this particular poem, the first modern Nepali poet describes how he was inspired by the transcendental deeds of a fellow villager. The humble grass cutter has saved money to build a public well so that posterity would remember him for his socially inspired deed. Bhanubhakta, an educated man from a well-to-do Bahun family, felt disappointed and inadequate that he had done nothing worth remembering while the poor and ignorant villager was already set to perpetuate his name through his socially significant action. It is from this example of social significance that Bhanubhakta decides to dedicate himself to letters with a hope of leaving behind his own legacy.

In that sense, *naam kamaune* is a dominant concept which asserts itself in the various values, beliefs and worldviews of the Nepali society and was the pre-dominant value guiding Nepali society in the past, in particular, through charitable deeds. At present, however, its value has eroded and *daam kamaune* (earning money) seems to be taking precedence.

In a society that has been largely based on agriculture, migration for *daam kamauna* is not a new phenomenon either. In fact, there is a long history

10 Shah 2004, 8. Shah uses the term memoreality to define *naam rakhne* – “*Naam rakhne* (keeping a name) and *naam kamaune* (earning a name) are common folk expressions in Nepal. The idea of name in this context encompasses more than its unidimensional referential function. ‘Keeping a name’ is a multilayered value incorporating aspirations of autonomous actions and the ability of the self to transcend the impermanence of life through socially significant deeds. I phrase such an agentive inflection in *naam rakhne* as memoreality. I employ the new formulation because of the inadequacy of memory to convey the subject’s intention of projecting the reality of her or his memory into the future. The difference between the two concepts is also directional: while memory is the perception of the one revisiting the past, memoreality in contrast is the intention of the agent to inscribe oneself through socially enduring legacies”.

11 Ibid, 9

of Nepalis migrating to foreign lands to earn a living. This issue is fairly well documented and narrated in Nepali literature as well. A summation of two literary works will be helpful in initiating the argument presented in this paper.

First, a popular work by Laxmi Prasad Devkota, *Muna Madan* (1936) tells the story of the main characters Madan and his wife, Muna. In this story, Madan's aged mother has a very intense desire to have a drinking water tap and a rest house built in her village for passing travellers. Madan also wants to gift a pair of golden bangles to Muna, but he is unable to fulfil either his or his mother's desire because of poverty. So, he decides to migrate to Bhot (Tibet) to earn money. Muna disapproves of his decision but after heated discussions, Madan is finally able to convince his wife. After working for some time in Tibet, Madan is able to earn a bagful of gold and he decides to return home. Unfortunately, on the way back, he contracts cholera, falls severely ill and is left alone on the road in his weakened state by his friends. He is found by a kind villager who helps him recover before he sets out for home once again. In a cruel twist of fate, when he finally arrives home, Madan finds out that both his mother and wife have already passed away.

Similarly, in his short play, *Tika*, Bhim Nidhi Tiwari emphasises the concept of 'home' by portraying a sentiment of nationalism.¹² The play revolves around Kaman Singh and his aged mother. Kaman Singh is a migrant working in India who returns home for the festival of *Dashain* to receive *tika*¹³ from his mother and to celebrate the festival with his family. His mother, wife and son rejoice upon his arrival. After the festivities conclude, a conversation takes place between Kaman Singh and his mother in which Kaman Singh is advised by his mother to stay back in Nepal with his family. In response, Kaman Singh argues that he can earn more in India due to the higher exchange value of the Indian rupee. He says 'I migrated because if I earn 40 rupees a month here in Nepal, it is only 40 but, if I earn 40 there then its value is 64 here'. Annoyed by Kaman Singh's answer, his mother points out the value of home (also signifying the country) to him:

12 Tiwari 2049 BS

13 A holy mark put on the forehead during prayers, festivals and religious rituals as a blessing.

Dear, you don't toil for money. Work with half-filled stomach for your own home. This entire country is your own. Take a stride on your own land. Drop your sweat on your own clump of soil. Man receives joy only when his own house is standing.

Highly inspired by his mother's words, Kaman Singh renounces the idea of going back to India, saying:

...why can't one add a handful in a pot containing ten mugs of water? I am convinced, oh Mother. One should spend his life in his own village. Enjoy in his own home, thatch his own roof. Four years have gone by. I will send them a letter, saying that I am duty bound, I can't depart.

Both these literary works reference the specific cultural and historical practice in the Nepali society of resorting to migration to earn money. In their own way, both portray *kamaune* in a foreign land as being unpleasant as it takes you away from your home and family while also giving primacy to money rather than to the country. In the first work, it results in the migrant worker being unaware of the death of his loved ones, while in the second, it is illustrated as being against the spirit of nationalism. It is evident that the authors are symbolically discouraging migration of Nepalis to foreign lands for the sake of earning.

***Kamaune* in the present**

In the contemporary Nepali landscape, the above-mentioned works of literature have had little influence on the large number of Nepalis who are tempted to migrate to earn. Many of my respondents echoed the view of '*yaha basera kehi hudaina*' (nothing is going to happen staying here). This is a far cry from the sentiments expressed by Devkota and Tiwari in their writings. The large number of Nepalis applying to settle in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia, and many others applying for labour permits to go to countries primarily in the Gulf and South East Asia is a common feature of the Nepali society today.

In Gwaldaha, too, the male members' out-migration is seen as being driven by the desire to earn money. The new market economy, the modern educational system and the increasing diversification of occupations have

pushed people towards *daam kamaune*. Evidently, this is because Nepali society is gradually being integrated into the world economy where new sets of beliefs like liberalisation and privatisation dominate, leading to an increase in the inclination towards cash earnings. Alongside, this has at the same time also contributed to a decline in the number of people engaged in agriculture and a rapid shift towards non-agricultural activities. In fact, the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) 2010/11 reveals that among wage earners, the number of those involved in agriculture has gone down from 53 per cent in 1995/96 to 35 per cent in 2010/11.¹⁴ But, because the non-agricultural sector in Nepal is not able to absorb all the youth in search of employment, the number of Nepalis migrating abroad for work has increased rapidly. According to the 2011 census, one in every four households (i.e., 1.38 million households) reported at least one member as being absent or living outside the country.¹⁵ The total number of absentee population in 2011 stood at approximately 1.9 million compared to 762,181 in 2001.

However, unlike the earlier times when Nepalis migrated to Tibet or India, the patterns and trends of migration has seen much change, particularly since the 1990s. While Nepalis continue to be drawn by opportunities in foreign land, the magnitude of the outflow has increased tremendously and, concomitantly, so has the array of destinations beyond the borders. Among these foreign destinations, countries in the Gulf namely Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Malaysia, in Southeast Asia, are popular among Nepali migrants. In fiscal year 2012/13, the government issued a total of 453,543 work permits to migrants seeking employment in foreign countries with 156,770 for Malaysia; 90,935 for Qatar; 86,276 for Saudi Arabia; and 52,295 in the UAE.¹⁶

14 CBS 2011, 2

15 CBS 2012

16 Department of Foreign Employment Monthly Report of *Asar* (June-July) 2012/13. This figure does not include those who initially went abroad without labour permit and later obtained the permits while on leave. It also does not include those going to India, as due to the open border between Nepal and India, there aren't any official documents, like visa required. See CESLAM Interactive Map <www.ceslam.org/map> for data on migration from Nepal.

The Need to Migrate

In the households of Gwaldaha, as in most places in Nepal, the division of labour occurs along gender lines, where men engage in income-generating economic activities, while women are in charge of the domestic sphere and in charge of activities such as cooking and cleaning, and caring for the children and the elderly. Every member of the household has his/her own *jimmewari* (responsibilities). In the words of Sarala, a female respondent:

As you know a house does not operate automatically. Everyone has to do the work assigned to them honestly for the household to run well. The male member of the house should follow approved behaviour and avoid addictive substances. He should be concerned about the welfare of the house. To do this, he has to dedicate himself to *kamauna*. Similarly, female members of the house should take care of the house. Men are out from the house working all day, so it is the women's responsibility to take care of the home, children and elderly. If we become irresponsible in our work, this will create a big problem in the family and male members cannot mentally devote themselves to *kamauna*. My husband was in a dilemma on whether or not to go to *bidesh*. It was I who motivated him to go by assuring him. I said, 'Don't worry; I will take care of father, mother and all the family members.' Our household is sustained through the hard work he is doing in *bidesh*. In his absence, we are all devoted to our responsibilities.

Jimmewari signifies the day-to-day action of the human agency, in particular, the role and performance of the self. It is each person carrying out their given responsibility which makes the household functional. *Kamaune* is socially structured as the responsibility of the male members whereas that of the women lies in motivating the menfolk to *kamauna* by actively participating in and managing the daily household requirements, both before and after migration. Both male and female members are aware of their social responsibilities. Sarala's assurance to her husband is motivational and an encouraging push factor for him to leave home and family in order to be able to fulfil his responsibility. In this manner, the role of female members is very influential and indispensable in the overall process of migration. This is in line with Gulati's findings:

The question remains whether women's supportive role in the matter of male migration was voluntary or not. Our evidence shows that women are more than merely passive supporters.¹⁷

Similarly, stressing the importance of women's role in male migration in the context of West Africa, Arthur elaborates:¹⁸

The specific nature of the importance of family structure in migration decision making in West Africa will be incomplete without mentioning the special role played by women. West African women play an extremely important role in the migratory process in a male-dominated society even when they themselves are not emigrants. They are the ones who do the major share of the planning and arranging that must begin after the decision to migrate has been made.

In Gwaldaha, migration has emerged as a prime option in being able to fulfil and sustain individual as well as social functions, and has been assimilated into the social reality. In fact, for male members, *kamaune* has been ingrained as a duty while female members not only oversee the household duties but also encourage a male member to be economically independent. Thus, males cultivate a desire to migrate for *kamauna*. During my research, I came across several relatively prosperous households who owned land, cemented buildings and had members who were gainfully employed in hotels, factories, private companies, etc. and yet some of the men had still opted to migrate for work. They felt that the money they were earning in Nepal was insufficient.

Many female respondents who had migrant husband, confessed that while initially it was difficult to cope with the separation from their spouses, they overcame the difficulty in a few months. They were proud of their men whose decision to migrant was perceived as being for the sake of the family. The same female respondents also expressed the view that the remittances symbolised the sweat of their migrant family member's hard work. Speaking out in favour of migration and accepting the absence of males as natural because they

17 Gulati 1987, 42

18 Arthur 1991, 78

are fulfilling their responsibility which had significance in the day-to-day functions of the household, a female respondent echoed the voices of many women: 'Everything is so expensive, what can you earn by staying in Nepal?' Some of the respondents also mentioned the political instability in the country to emphasise that very little can be done in terms of *kamauna* by staying back in the country.

Returnee migrants also underscored *kamauna* as being the primary motive of their migration as they were unable to do so within the country due to the political instability and lack of opportunities. A male returnee remarked: 'We migrated not because of choice, but because of compulsion.' The male returnees also echoed the frustrations expressed by their female counterparts saying that 'nothing can be done by staying in Nepal where everything is so expensive and the expansion of the employment sectors is hindered by political instability.' Here, the opportunity to migrate provides them with the much-needed alternative. In addition, migration also provides an opportunity for a man to embody oneself as a man earning money for the family.

Unfortunately, not all men are able to live up to their own or their families' expectations, especially with regards to *kamauna*. This is because the cost of migration—recruitment fees, airfare, training, medical check-ups and insurance—are quite significant. To meet such expenses many take loans, often at high interest rates, but for many others who are unable to do so, the chances of migrating diminish.

At the same time, although success stories of migrants remitting money and coming back with luxurious goods inspire others to follow in their footsteps, unfortunate incidents of death and injuries and being stranded also generate debate among aspiring migrants and their family members on whether they should migrate or not. The grim case of Ram Gopal is one such story that serves as caution to aspiring residents of Gwaldaha. Ram Gopal was a migrant worker who died in Malaysia at the age of 24. His 64-year-old father who lives alone and suffers from leprosy shared his account on his son's fate:

He was well educated. He completed his BA at a young age. He used to teach in a public school nearby before leaving for Malaysia. His salary was sufficient for our family and as a teacher he was well respected in the village. One day he told me he wanted to go to Malaysia, and tried to convince me

that he would earn more than what he was earning here. I did not want him to leave and tried to convince him to stay. But it was his wife who forced him to leave the country. Through her cousin's manpower agency, he flew to Malaysia. After seven months, he sent NPR 65,000. But after some months, news arrived that he had died there. His unprecedented demise surprised us all. Some of his friends have speculated that he might have committed suicide.

The Gendered Notion of *Kamaune*

The *kamaune* notion is highly gendered in nature as it is contextually, culturally and structurally rooted in the Nepali social structure. As stated before, in Nepali society, the responsibility of *kaumana* falls on the male members of the family. Those involved in *kamaune* view their prime responsibility as a male member as being to engage in the public sphere and in income-generating activities, including cash earnings to meet the economic needs of their families, since his status in the Nepali society is determined by the scale of property he possesses as well as his earnings. The question *Ke garnu huncha?* (what do you do?) has assumed great importance in contemporary social life since the answer contains the potential of establishing the individual self within the contours of society.

Migration of males has become a basis of *kamaune* and has gained social and cultural meaning in Nepali society, specifically in making, shaping, and securing masculine identity. Sharma's (2008) ethnographic fieldwork of male migration from Western Hills of Nepal to the Indian cities found that one of the major causes of male migration is to retain their masculinity.¹⁹

Thus, compared to staying in the village, going to work in India opened up possibilities of being modern and developed, exploring a distant place and demonstrating the conception of manhood. The village men did not want to be seen as *phāltu* (useless men), wandering in and around the village, but aspired to migrate and to be known as successful and responsible men (commonly known as *jāgīre* or *lāhure*).

19 Sharma 2008, 315

Kamaune substitutes the state of idleness and denotes a condition of dynamism. Household female members perceive male mobility as a trajectory towards progress and advancement. It is applicable both to the idle male and the male whose earning is insufficient. An unemployed or economically underachieving husband is a major cause of distress within households. As expressed by a female respondent, Gita: '*Chora manche le kehi ta garnai paryo ni*' (A man has to do something).

The same sentiment is also exemplified in the case of Gayatri, wife of a migrant. Her husband did nothing when he was in Gwaldaha. He spent his days drinking, idly gossiping with friends and playing cards. All the family members were worried about him and it became a source of extended argument in the family. Finally, her husband decided to go to *bidesh*. Gayatri contributed to this process by selling her gold ornaments and taking a loan from her neighbour so that her husband could afford the expenses of flying to Malaysia where he could work and fulfil his responsibility as a *kamaune* male.

An ethnographic study conducted in Kerala, India by Osella and Osella also revealed that the migration of males to the Gulf was driven by an attempt to safeguard their masculinity:

Migration appears as particularly relevant to masculinity in its enhanced relationship with money, an externalizable (detachable) form of masculine potency: maturity means being able to use such resources wisely.²⁰

In Osella and Osella's study, many of the respondents were unmarried whereas in my present research, the majority of the migrants are married males. Regardless, in Gwaldaha, males are equally concerned about safeguarding their masculinity and searching for alternative means for *kamauna*. Gyatri, like other respondents shared the following:

All the family members told my husband not to go to *bidesh* but his only answer was, '*Chboro hu! Kita kamayera aaye, kita des ghumera aaye*' (I am a son! I will return either by earning or return with the experience of having travelled to a foreign land).

20 Osella and Osella 2000, 117

His declaration, '*Chhoro hu!*', or I am a son, is indicative of how Gyatri's husband views risk-taking as being part of his gender identity, a common enough worldview among many males in Nepali society. However, the female member's role and contribution to this process is also crucial. Just as Gayatri contributed to her husband's migration by coming up with the cash, another respondent, Gita said: 'It is I who pressurised my husband to go to *bidesh* because as a son one has to do something in his life.'

This statement serves to reiterate the notion that men should not stay idle. A non-working male is not viewed kindly by the female members of the household. Aware of this perception and ingrained with the same ideology, the men understand what must be done to gain social acceptance. Otherwise, as mentioned by Sharma, they risk gaining an identity as *fhaltu* (useless men). Such males are not only a cause of concern to their family but are also socially stigmatised. Thus, in order to avoid being labelled as being *fhaltu* and to fulfil the *jimmewari* ascribed to them by virtue of their gender, many males, not only in Gwaldaha but across Nepal, have adopted migration as a path to *kamauna* and consequently to retain their masculinity.

Migration is also driven by other reasons that reflect the wider set of social responsibilities of the male member. For instance, many migrate to save money for the wedding of unmarried female members at home, while others migrate to be able to afford to build their own house as was the case with Maya's son.

Maya is visually impaired and her husband suffers from leprosy. Their only son, Dhruva, now 32, has been working as a cook in a hotel in Dubai for five years now. They are being taken care of by their daughter-in-law. Maya did not approve of her only son's decision to go to Dubai but he insisted. She still wants him to come back and work in Nepal even though the family has benefitted from the remittance; they were able to use the remittance to add a second floor to their house. But, Maya argues:

I do not like that my only son is separated from us, his disabled parents, and is living in *bidesh*. We frequently hear of many awful incidents happening in *bidesh*. I have begged him to stay in Nepal many times and do any kind of work here and even continue his studies but he doesn't listen to me. He always says, 'I can't find any good jobs here. Even if I did find some job, the earnings will be sufficient only for me. Father needs medicine all the time and I have to pay for my wife's college.' Since, he left for *bidesh*, he has come home only twice so far.

Remittances, besides being a source of financial support, also hold a special kind of meaning to the family. It is viewed as being a symbol of care, support and filial relationship that extends across countries.²¹ The remitted money is taken by the receiving households as ‘sacred’ money and holds significant value that weighs more than its monetary worth for the dependents.²² The money is perceived by the family members as being *dukha gareko kamai* (money earned through hard work) and *pasina bagayera kamako paisa* (money earned through sweat). Therefore, the family socialises the children to be parsimonious and very conscious in spending the money. As stated by Sabita: ‘We are still running household expenses with the money he had sent four months ago. I don’t know when he is going to send next’. Her husband had sent fifty thousand rupees at the time.

Samajik Ijyat

Kamaune is also related to *samajik ijyat* (social prestige). *Ijyat* means honour or prestige derived by an individual’s estimation by others. Cultural narratives and moral values define how males and females should conduct themselves in society to maintain *ijyat*. In Gwaldaha, the dominant determinant of *ijyat* is the individual’s economic status in the society, which is determined primarily by the individual’s consumption capabilities. Since it is a small settlement, how and on what people spend money is very public information. In his study about modernity and middle class in Kathmandu, anthropologist Mark Liechty delineates the middle-class consciousness rooted in *ijyat*:

Perhaps more than any other possession, the middle class is built around the economy of *ijyat*, an economy in which honor or prestige is the central form of capital. Through its constant retelling and renegotiation, *ijyat* become almost tangible: it can be gained or lost, preserved or squandered. In this social economy, sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs and education are not *ijyat* in and of themselves. Instead, they are things that give *ijyat* (*ijyat dine ci*); they produce social capital. Staking claims in this *ijyat* economy is perhaps the key move in the individual’s or family’s efforts to negotiate membership in the middle class.²³

21 Singh 2006, 391

22 Ibid

23 Liechty 2003, 83-84

In order to be able to retain as well as increase *ijjat* male members of the household have to accumulate a large amount of money. One can elevate his/her status in society by demonstrating the amount of money one possesses, i.e., through the possession of electronic appliances and other consumer items, by investing money in real estate in the major urban towns, and spending lavishly during rituals and ceremonies. The demonstration of extravagant wealth increases the chances of gaining higher social status in the society. However, as Liechty notes: '[T]he *ijjat* economy is never only a moral economy or only a material economy. It is always both.'²⁴

In this way, in Nepali social structure, prestige can be derived, gained and regained on the basis of how much an individual earns and what they consume. But, the need for ready cash is also increasing—Nepali markets have become exposed to a diversity of consumer goods; festivals and rituals are being celebrated more lavishly by those with disposable income; and the young generation have developed a taste and fondness for modern equipment from motorcycles to electronic gadgets. In such a context, social networks—ones built on trust and reciprocity—are also increasingly being determined by the wealth and property one possesses. More so than ever, the correlation between earnings and social dignity is also strengthening. As a result, the amount of money required to meet the needs of a family and consequently, maintaining *ijjat*, is fast increasing. But, in a predominantly agricultural society, opportunities to generate the requisite wealth is limited; thus, migration has become a means to generating that wealth, and maintaining one's *ijjat* and status in society.

Future Security

Kamaune is not only an intermediary for present consumption and expenditure but also an investment for the future. The larger the parental property transferred to the next generation, the higher the chances of a financially secure future. This is beneficial for a prosperous future of both the children and parents. In Nepali society, parental property is traditionally inherited or passed down to the sons. It is believed that passing down more property to one's son means greater security for old age. Similarly, purchasing gold, besides its use in various rituals and occasions, such as weddings, births, and other social rituals, is also viewed

24 Liechty 2010, 17

as a good investment for the future. Many of my respondents mentioned that they would buy gold, build concrete houses in Gwaldaha, purchase land, both in Gwaldaha and Kathmandu, if possible, and invest in business in the future from the money that their husband or son will bring from *bidesh*.

Notably, mobility for *kamaune* goes beyond social prestige and the male responsibility of living up to the expectations of their parents, spouses and the wider community. It is also tied to the desire of wanting to be a worthy father, especially the aspiration to secure a better future for their children. During the course of my study, many of the returnees emphasised that the primary reason for their migration was not for themselves but for the future security of their children, which is often equated with good education. One of the returnees, Bikram, remarked:

When I was a child, I was never interested in going to school. When I was in the fifth grade, I quit school. Now I realise the value of education. I don't want my son and daughter to be illiterate like me. If I don't provide them with a good education they will have to face the same kind of hardships I did. I was somehow able to raise them with the salary I made by working as a driver for others. However, when I admitted them to a private school, the money I used to earn was not sufficient to be able to keep them in school, as well as pay for the household expenses. When Hari *dai* [a migrant from the same village] came home for two months from Kuwait, I asked him to find me a job as well. After eight months, he managed to get me a job as a helper. Later on, when the company realised that I could drive, they employed me as a driver. It is better to be a driver there than a helper because I get a better salary. It is hard being away from my family, but for the sake of my children's future, I had to take this step. We couldn't study but my wife and I do not want to see our children become illiterates. We have admitted them in a boarding school²⁵; let's see what they will do.

Bikram's reason for migration reflects, among other things, a male's *jimmewari*, regrets over not having completed his schooling, concern for children's education

25 Private schools are commonly referred to as boarding schools in Nepal

and their future, and the high premium placed on good education regardless of cost.

In the broader context of Nepal, the post-1990 period has witnessed the commoditisation of the basic needs of the people like health and education. It is not only goods, but basic services, like education and health facilities, too that are being bought and sold. In order to receive a good education and access health amenities, one has to pay a hefty sum to private service providers. The husbands of four of the respondents used to earn NPR 8000-10,000 per month²⁶ in Nepal, which by the Nepali market standards is not a bad income for their skills sets given that one worked as a teacher, another was employed in a tissue paper factory, the third a driver and the last an employee in a private enterprise in Kathmandu. Yet, they chose to migrate. When asked why they did so despite making a decent living here, in the words of one of them, the following was the common answer:

It is necessary to educate children and most things are only possible with money. As you earn more, you can fulfil your own requirements, and people start respecting you. Money maintains your status within your family, amongst neighbours and in the village.

Among male migrants, this notion of earning for the welfare of the children has been documented in the broader literature on migration as well. For instance, in the ethnographical study in Kohery, a village in Pakistan, Francis Watkins outlines the motif of Kohery men's migration to the Gulf countries:

Through these tales of hardship, the underlying theme is one of selflessness. Men repeatedly emphasized that they worked abroad not to earn money for themselves, but to save it and send it home to their families. Thus, their aim was not immediate, personal reward, but was rather to endure hardships and struggle for the sake of others.²⁷

26 This figure amounts to roughly NPR 96,000 to 120,000 per year which is much higher than the national poverty line of NPR 19,261, as estimated by the Nepal Living Standards Survey 2010-11.

27 Watkins 2004, 64

Hence, migration is not only seen as a means to fulfil the male *jimmewari* but it is also acknowledged as a sacrifice made for the better future of the family, in particular, the children. In Gwaldaha, prior to migration, many of the migrants' children were enrolled in government schools. Male migration has made it possible for the households to transfer their children into private schools. Thus, the idea of investing in children's education to maintain one's social status through the act of sending children to expensive schools has become commonplace.

CONCLUSION

Migration is an inevitable phenomenon and the same is true in the case of Nepal, which has a recorded history of migration dating back centuries. However, a new pattern of mobility has emerged in Nepal after 1990 when the demand for Nepali labourers in the Southeast Asia and the Gulf began to rise. It is evident from semi-urban areas, like Gwaldaha, that the income required to meet everyday requirements of a family is increasing, especially at a time when there are hardly any employment opportunities within the country itself. Hence, migration has become an accepted alternative for males to fulfil their responsibility to earn for their households.

This paper has attempted to unfold one of the social realities of the migration process, the notion of *kumanune*. Out-migration occurs for *kamauna*; these migrants are the *kamaune* migrants. Earning and spending are intertwined categories: one has to earn in order to spend, and there are both household and social priorities for spending. *Kamaune* has important meanings both in terms of economic and socio-cultural setting. A male member of the household accomplishes their responsibility, the *jimmewari* of *kamauna*, by migrating. The case of Gwaldaha has presented labour migration as social, cultural and economic processes where individuals, especially male members, migrate in search of betterment for themselves and their families.

However, it is also crucial to remember that the household as a unit of analysis cannot be overlooked in migration studies. Household members are also key actors in the overall process of migration, as is the gender relations within the household. The household division of labour is such that male members have to engage in activities that bring in income, and women encourage the male members to fulfil their respective *jimmewari*. An idle male member in a household becomes problematic, both within the household and the larger community. Therefore, lack of work at home, meagre incomes, social pressure to earn prestige, the need to fulfil the everyday requirements of the household, and investment in the future of their children are all important factors which lead Gwaldaha males to migrate.

By using the case of Gwaldaha, this paper has tried to emphasise these important social, economic, and cultural facets of labour migration that are

often overlooked. The role of these factors are critical to the entire process of migration and this can be better understood by delving into the perspective of the household members and communities left behind.

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The Author

Gaurab KC holds a master's degree in Anthropology from Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. He is a researcher at Martin Chautari, Kathmandu. His research interests include migration, media, intellectual biography, disciplinary history, and street economy.

