

Research Article

In Search of a New Muglan: Culture of Migration in the Eastern Himalayas

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Abstract

Seven decades after India's independence, tea plantations across Darjeeling are being abandoned by owners. This article explores afterlives of abandoned plantations in Darjeeling. Working through an analytic of livability, this paper asks what forms afterlives take—in these spaces of post-industrial ruination and decay. This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in six abandoned plantations in Darjeeling and Siliguri, conducted by participant observation between 2019 and 2021. This article explores workers' struggle to maintain a life of dignity in the wake of abandonment. This article will first describe two brief encounters where sentiments of dissatisfaction are expressed, which provide an understanding of the everyday precarity and marginalization of workers and their children. Abandonment has also engendered an increase in migration from these tea plantations. I will then explore the effects of transnational migration which displaces people's identities and sense of belonging. I discuss how migration has been facilitated by kinship networks across borders. I will then discuss another set of encounters in a recruitment agency. Recruitment for transnational labor markets has engendered its own set of exploitation owing to India's deficient migration policy and regulatory oversight. In this paper, I explore the choice to migrate as a wider political question of freedom and social transformation—a rethinking of the conditions of life to explore conditions for flourishing lives.

Keywords

Darjeeling; abandonment; migration; recruitment; labor

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Introduction

The main thoroughfare area in Darjeeling is situated at the top of a hill, overlooking the mountain Khanchendzonga. It is an open space, often utilized for hosting political and cultural events. It serves as the leisurely space for tourists to shop and read by roadside cafes, while the youth sit idly just passing time: an indication of the unemployment of the educated youth (Jeffrey 2010). In 2019, as Dussehra was only a few days away, I found myself accompanying my mother in purchasing various items, jostling for space with other shoppers. The whole town was alive with last minute purchases and a spirit of festivity hung in the air. Suddenly, a group of young activists broke into the parting crowd, singing songs and chanting slogans. They were protesting the refusal of the tea plantation management to give a hike in bonus during the festival season to the plantation workers.

The next day, union leaders of the tea plantations sat in observing a relay hunger strike at the bus stand. They were accompanied by gloomy looking politicians who looked uncomfortable but turned up. The festival of Dashain (Dussehra), marks an important landmark in the calendar of the locals. For the workers, the yearly bonus given in October provides funds for painting homes, shopping for new clothes, purchasing winter apparel, holding feasts, and entertaining relatives (Besky 2017). It marks a significant event of the local culture in Darjeeling. However, for the tea garden workers and their children, Dashain never arrived that year. The unions, politicians, and the tea management failed to reach a consensus over the rate of yearly bonus to be given to the plantation workers.¹

Unable to celebrate due to lack of funds, at a time when other locals return back home from across India and abroad with gifts and cash, has increased their alienation and reminded them of downward mobility, since the replacement of 'facility model' by the current 'business model' (Besky 2014). This dejection, frustration, and humiliation of being unable to provide celebratory meals and new clothes for relatives and children during Dashain, saw a flurry of agonizing voices and a damaging blow to the low morale of the plantation workers. However, it is not only the plantation workers who are suffering from a feeling of being cast aside and left behind. Even the educated, unemployed youth who have traditionally lived and

moved outside of tea plantations are finding little avenues for employment, apart from the scarce menial jobs available in town (Brown, Scrase, and Ganguly-Scrase 2016). In a sense, this dejection represents the increasing sense of precariousness of millions of people across the world (Standing 2011; O'Neill 2014). It is this dejection and precariousness of lives that leads me to ask: how do people cope with staggering unemployment, stagnation and diminishing livability? What are the ways in which people grapple with everyday frustrations amid constricting resources? In the Darjeeling Hills, abandonment of tea plantations by owners have rendered workers' lives asunder; political movements in 1986, 2007, and 2017 have failed to achieve either meaningful recognition and redistribution; supposed devolution of powers have provided neither development nor employment opportunities. Meanwhile, constant protests have been met with state violence and repression. Therefore, it becomes crucial to situate and understand people's response to suffering and unemployment in the face of such alienation and repression.

In this paper, drawing on ethnographic accounts of people's lived experiences, I attempt to situate and explain people's strategies for survival through an exploration of the affect of *dukkha* (suffering). I suggest *dukkha* illuminates the social and economic state of being where life has become unlivable. The possibility of what Butler terms "livable life" is affected by the basic socio-economic conditions that sustain life but also by conditions of social intelligibility: "normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life" (Butler 2004: 39). The lack of conditions which sustain life is what *dukkha* encapsulates (Butler 2009). It forms the background to the central question this paper addresses: how do everyday experiences of abandonment and *dukkha* of people in Darjeeling lead to a culture of migration? In an attempt to answer this question, I argue the contemporary pattern of migration is not something that has been received from the past, but rather emerges from current conditions of abandonment, the outcome of the organizing efforts of people who seek to transform living standards and the catalytic role of agents. Focusing on the quotidian dejection, frustration, and aspirations amid lack of employment opportunities gives us an insight into the lives of people, built around plantation structures since the colonial era. It gives us an opening into the anger and dissatisfaction simmering in their everyday life. Here, the lack

of employment opportunities and income perpetuate the decision of families to seek a better life. As conditions of life are slipping below the expected norms of livability, people are seeking an escape, even from places that have been home for over two centuries.

The Eastern Himalayan region has a remarkable history of trade, mobility, and migration as historical trade routes depended on mobility across the present-day nation-states of Nepal, India, Bhutan, and China (Tibet). The diverse nature of mobility and migration occurring within this region as people migrate for improved livelihood opportunities has been documented (Hitchcock 1961; Brusle 2008; Thieme 2008; Adhikari and Gurung 2009; Shneiderman 2015). The arrival of the British in the Himalayan frontiers (1815) saw European capital incorporate these places into circuits of global capitalism. In the case of Darjeeling, investments were made in the tea and cinchona plantations. This ushered large-scale migration of indigenous peasants leaving their homes in Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan to work in plantations in Darjeeling. Transnational migration from the Eastern Himalayas has occurred from the time they were incorporated into the British Army to fight in the World Wars (Onta 1994). In line with recent trends, the scale of international migration is increasing across the world and labor migration from this region is expanding with distinct migration corridors developing over the years.²

In Darjeeling, decaying spaces of labor have forced people to *again* seek alternate spaces of labor, often in foreign nations. Since the 2000s, migration from the Eastern Himalayas has become a common phenomenon. Every month, hundreds of people leave for employment opportunities abroad, mostly to countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. This current spate of migration has been precipitated by the abandonment of tea plantations. Lack of alternative industries for employment have further diminished livability. The Gorkhaland movement has sought to channel this despondency but has encountered State repression and violence. Around eleven people died in the Gorkhaland agitation of 2017 when Darjeeling endured a lockdown lasting for over a hundred days while dissident leaders were jailed and charged with sedition. All these factors have come together in mutually constitutive ways to foster citizens struggling to bear increasing alienation. One of the ways they have sought to

negotiate unfavorable situations at home has been to migrate abroad.

The most influential proponent of the culture of migration debate covers the study of Mexican migrants to America (Kandel and Massey 2002). In such societies, values and the cultural perceptions regarding migration are always determined by the previous migratory journeys. As people from this region worked in British colonies across Southeast Asian countries (Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong) military families have extensive histories of working in foreign lands (Subba and Sinha 2016; Gellner and Hausner 2018). Enduring migratory practices can often be the referential source for orienting and motivating choices people make regarding migration. The three major understandings of the culture of migration can be identified as follows. Firstly, it refers to the way in which migration becomes a cultural fact in the communities of the sending country. This refers to how “emergence of new artifacts, habits, perspectives, ideas and values” change in the culture to reflect the marked overture in values of people and their decisions-making context (Horváth 2008: 773). Secondly, it refers to migration as a learned social behavior as “people learn to migrate, and they learn to desire to migrate” (Ali 2008: 39). Thirdly, migration is seen as a necessary social function or a rite of passage to adulthood (Massey 1986). Rather than migration becoming an optional practice, it becomes imperative on the youth to choose from a narrow range of alternatives. Therefore, migration as a cultural pattern penetrates the decisional contexts of societies (Horváth 2008). In the Eastern Himalayas, these patterns are visible as considerable youths view migration as a highly lucrative option to earn livelihoods.

In this paper, I draw on my ethnographic research in six abandoned plantations of Darjeeling (Peshok, Longview, Dooteriah, Kalej Valley, Panighatta, and Singla) and the city of Siliguri conducted between 2019 and 2021. My methodology is grounded in fieldwork conducted in patches interrupted by waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. This “patchwork ethnography” was conducted due to waves of the COVID-19 pandemic wreaking havoc on my fieldwork design (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). In this paper, I explore three dimensions of the culture of migration in the Eastern Himalayas. Focusing on rapidly growing precariat in the abandoned tea plantations in Darjeeling, in the first section, this paper illustrates how

abandonment devastates livable conditions leading to an augmentation of migration. In the second section, I discuss the effects of transnational migration on transforming people's identities and sense of belonging. In the third section, I explore the emerging exploitation in recruitment zones, as a result of weak migration policy and regulatory oversight. In conclusion, I argue the choice to migrate is a wider political question of freedom and social transformation, a rethinking of the conditions of life to explore conditions for flourishing lives.

Precarity in Abandoned Plantations

At a first glance, the lush green tea plants covering the stretch of Peshok tea plantation belies the suffering of the workers. After the abandonment of this plantation in 2015 by owners, workers found themselves in distress. Most families quickly ran out of their meager savings after salaries were discontinued and provident fund payments unreleased. Persistent reminders from schools about tuition to be paid, medicines to be procured for the sick, and groceries to be purchased from markets made matters worse. Abandonment of Peshok led to a flurry of political polemics but no concrete policies and bills were passed to provide relief for the workers. When I was conducting my research in Peshok, I met Prashant Rai. A middle-aged lanky man, his weatherworn face and sorrowful eyes betrayed his long years working in tea plantations.

We are poor. We take household items from the *Mahajan* (Marwari businessman) for family groceries and other essentials in credit. As we pass by his shop, we look down to avoid facing him and walk inconspicuously because we are ashamed to face him due to our inability to pay back our debts. During Dashain, every parent long to provide new clothes for their children. Even our kids have realized their parents are poor and don't demand new clothes. But they do observe all their friends dressed in new clothes. A lot of us were waiting for our pensions but they are denying us even that. We are experiencing *dukkha*. It has become difficult to live here. (Interview with Nirvan Pradhan 08.07.2021)

Abandonment of tea plantations that have been operating at a loss have inflated worker's vulnerabilities and intensified desires to

escape such areas. Many people have reached their threshold of tolerance to this "*dukkha*". Prashant's comment that it has become "difficult to live here" provides us an insight into workers' diminished livable conditions in abandoned plantations. Precariousness of plantation workers is shaped by the social and institutional life in abandoned plantations. For Butler (2009: 25) precarity implies a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed" to suffering, injury, and distress. A life of dignity is devastated in the face of a sudden unemployment crisis. Many of the laid-off workers described initial phases of angst, fear and dejection which eventually gave way to a determination to survive, at-least for the sake of their children. Some of the women are scraping by working in adjacent tea gardens where they are hired for daily wages without any benefits provided to permanent workers. Large number of the men are leaving to work in nearby cities. Most women narrated their trauma of being laid off in their middle-ages, switching jobs and taking up work as domestic maids as tales of "*dukkha payo*" (we experienced suffering).

While the present suffering of the workers is distressing, abandonment in Peshok is not a new phenomenon. Peshok was abandoned earlier by the owners in 1974-1975. An elderly worker recollected that they "suffered so much distress coercing them into selling family jewels to make ends meet." After this misfortune, the Tea Trading Corporation of India (TTCI) gained control of the plantation. However, after TTCI managed the plantation for a decade, Peshok was again abandoned due to financial difficulties in the company. The situation of the workers became grim, and their grievances was echoed in the Indian Parliament in 1997, by Dawa Lama who questioned: "whether Government are aware that thousands of labourers have been thrown out of employment due to virtual closure of three tea-gardens owned by TTCI e.g. Peshok, via Tukvar and Putung" and "whether Government are willing to save the tea-garden workers and their families from starvation immediately?" The Minister of State of the Ministry of Commerce replied:

Peshok and Tukvar tea gardens located in West Bengal, under Tea Trading Corporation of India Ltd. (TTCI) are not producing due to labour problems resulting from delay in payment of salary/

wages etc. on account of acute financial problems of TTCI Ltd. Government had decided to dispose of the gardens. The sale process could not be finalized due to legal constraints and financial difficulties of the prospective buyers. (Rajya Sabha Official Debates).³

Peshok continued to remain in limbo, and in 2001, a proposal was sent to the Central government from the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) for taking over the management and operation of Peshok “on as-is-where-is basis at no cost and also to meet the current liabilities of the above gardens by running them from mutually agreed date till the Tea Trading Corporation of India finalises the rehabilitation of workers and disposal of the gardens.” (Rajya Sabha Official Debates). However, the proposal was rejected as the former owners filed a case in regard to these gardens and the case in the Calcutta High Court was sub-judice. In 2007, Alchemist group took over the management of Peshok and operated it for about nine years. In 2015, Peshok was abandoned for the third time after the Alchemist group also faced financial difficulties leaving workers stranded in the process.

In Peshok, workers are disqualified from government assistance as no formal notification about the closure was served.⁴ An elderly worker, mistaking me for a government official, complained:

Please inform the government or higher authorities to release our retirement funds. I am old now and I cannot work. I still have over forty-thousand rupees of provident funds amount that has gone missing in all these lockdowns and abandonment. On top of that, we have not even been getting fawlo. (Interview with Nirvan Pradhan 23.2.2021)

The Government of West Bengal has initiated a scheme of financial assistance for workers of abandoned industries (FAWLO).⁵ Eligibility criteria stipulate that factories should have been under closure/suspension of work for more than a year. However, workers in Peshok were kept in abeyance as an abandoned tea plantation where they remain suspended as neither ‘officially closed’ to receive financial assistance from the government nor ‘practically open’ and functioning to receive daily wages. The workers were left on a limbo with no management structure, blueprint of their future, or

guarantee that continued labor will provide a steady income. Financial mismanagement by the owners has contributed towards this crisis. Abandonment has devastated the traditional lives of the workers made dependent on the plantation system. Powerful owners responsible for the *recurrent* crisis have been exempted from accountability. Therefore, abandonment of tea plantations has engendered shrinkage of employment opportunities contributing towards fostering a climate where migrating is the most viable route out of poverty and unemployment.

What are the possibilities of life in abandoned plantations despite ruination? Anna Tsing (2015) has argued that places that seem to contain the ruins of capitalism across the world can also be generative spaces. In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Tsing (2005) observes that there is always something left to salvage in ruins. After mass deforestation by international timber companies in Indonesia, Tsing noticed that local laborers out of jobs and deprived of the forest ecologies they had previously sustained them, turned to disassembling and selling parts of the machinery that was left behind. Such “salvage accumulation” (Tsing 2015: 63) is characteristic of life in the ruins. I observed such “salvage accumulation” across other abandoned plantations in Longview and Dooteriah where youths disassembled and sold off water pipes once used for watering the tea plants. This was done after the managers charged with maintaining discipline and protecting assets of the plantation had left. Workers also reacted by taking away furniture and items of value from the manager’s bungalow in Dooteriah and Panighatta. Selling water pipes and appropriating furniture are characteristics of “salvage accumulation” found in the afterlives of Darjeeling’s abandoned plantations.

Workers in abandoned plantations also subsist on the tea bushes. Elderly workers’ lives are subsisted by post-retirement labor of plucking tea leaves. In the aftermath of abandonment by the Alchemist group, a Joint Action Committee collects the freshly plucked tea leaves, transports them to nearby plantations for processing and sells them. Consequently, plantations have been subdivided into small plots, to be tended by individual households. In my field visits, family members were collectively watering, providing manure, pruning, and hacking the bushes. During the plucking season, workers collect and send the tea to the nearby estates for processing. The committee pays the workers for their produce from the income generated. Elderly

workers who labored for decades in the plantation are discontent with the committee for failing to negotiate their unpaid wages and retirement savings. Workers complained about the impossibility of sustaining families with the modicum income paid by the committee. An absence of hope pervades in abandoned plantations.

Abandonment and shutting down of plantations have increased since the beginning of the millennium. The spate of news reports on starvation and malnutrition of workers with no access to ration or medicines following the closure of tea plantations have been increasing over the years. In Darjeeling, there has been a state of closures including Ringtong, Lower Fagu, Jogmaya, and Ambiok tea estates. While some of them did eventually reopen, closures have continued with many like Bundapani, Simulbari, and Trihana also shutting down (Sarkar 2019). Recently, even Longview, Dhotrey, Kalej Valley, and Panighatta tea estates have closed following abandonment. In 2017, sixteen tea plantations were confirmed to have closed in North Bengal (Bhattacharya 2017). The State government has not announced any plans of handing over abandoned tea gardens to new owners. Inevitably, large numbers of workers who worked in abandonment plantations have joined the unemployed demography of this region.

Outside the plantations, employment opportunities are rare. Most of the upcoming generation are hesitant to take up traditional farming. As large-scale farming is impractical in hilly terrain, agrarian economy did not grow accordingly to keep in pace with the rising population. Large numbers of people in Darjeeling are unemployed and live in poverty. Government jobs are increasingly competitive, and few make it to top levels of bureaucracy, dominated by Bengalis. Upper echelons of the tourism sector are restricted to a limited number of non-natives and *locals* are usually employed as drivers, tourist guides, and hospitality staff. Shrinking employment opportunities have saturated in urban areas. In the post-colonial era, tea plantations were nationalized, and ownership and management of the tea gardens passed on from the British into the hands of elite Marwari and Bengali entrepreneurs (Besky 2014). The post-colonial experience of this region has been marked by a steady degeneration and uncertainty, leading to constant flash-ups and regional instability. No large-scale industries were set up considering the hilly terrain. Decades of economic and political subservience first to the British, and then to the

West Bengal government has taken its toll on the livelihoods and future of people (Middleton 2020).

The influence of the neo-liberal economic transformation from the 1970s transformed the world economy. Countries around the world changed their economic policies under pressure or voluntarily under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. One of their central planks was that nations ought to augment their 'labor market flexibility.' This risk and vulnerability were conveniently transferred to the workers. In time, real wages shrank, and people's living conditions degenerated around the world (Standing 2011). The impacts of structural adjustment policies have been borne by tea plantation workers. Post-independence, workers in plantations across Darjeeling have slowly been subject to increasing pressures and constraints as profits were not *reinvested* back into these plantations. Thus, denial of full bonus, delay in salaries, non-payment of provident funds, and arbitrary dismissals amidst increasing vulnerability are a part of a larger process where abandonment is the final blow to the fatigued workers.

Moreover, even as the extractive capacity of capitalism is reaching its limits in places like Darjeeling, the children of the tea plantation workers have realized the absence of a future in traditional employment. During my fieldwork, I came across Nawang Sherpa, a young man in his early twenties. His parents had been laid off and he abruptly discontinued his studies in college.

What will I do with a graduate degree? So many of my seniors are graduates and sit at home unemployed. College is just a waste of money and time. No jobs are available here. I am applying for a passport and planning on leaving for abroad. At least there I will be able to get a job. There is no future for young people in this place. Here we are oppressed and suppressed. Outside, we can work and flourish. (Interview with Nirvan Pradhan 10.06.2020)

In his work on young men in Ethiopia, Daniel Mains (2007) has argued that young men are unable to experience progress or take on the responsibilities of adults due to structural adjustment policies creating a gap between the aspirations of youth and economic realities. Mains argues that young men construct international migration as a solution to their temporal

problems. His insight captures the vulnerabilities of youth in Darjeeling. Unemployment figures in India have undergone a steady rise. According to the ILO estimates, for the past decade, youth unemployment rates are hovering around the 20% mark. Unemployment levels in the Hills are even higher. Young adults are subjected to an increasing sense of social shame by having to stay in Darjeeling Hills with no avenues of active employment or engagement. For Nawang, remaining in Darjeeling precluded him from participating in economic activities, inflicting a sense of cruel boredom (O'Neill 2017; Masquelier 2019). Children of tea plantation workers understand that slogging under an unjust plantation system is a ladder to nowhere in a town where nothing worthwhile for their future is possible. Nawang's experience of anomie - a feeling of passivity compounded by pessimism and despair - is common amongst the youth. Education previously viewed as a ladder of social mobility is considered ineffectual considering stark unemployment and dearth of opportunities in the public sector. With no career paths after graduation, young people experience "elusive adulthoods" as they are unable to grasp employment and achieve markers of social adulthood (Durham and Solway 2017).

For many workers and their children, abandonment and lack of employment opportunities have reduced conditions of livability. With the desire to live more viable lives, they challenge restrictive conditions but have been largely unsuccessful. Asking questions about livability in particular socio-political context is revealing, in that it illuminates lives which are viable and flourishing and brings into sharp focus the lives of abandoned plantation workers, who face increasingly restrictive conditions for livable life. Questions of which lives are viable and which lives are unlivable is a political question which holds the possibility for a radical transformation of a society's future.

Displacing

In this section, I turn to a vignette from Longview, another abandoned plantation in Darjeeling. One day, as I walked the last dusty miles leading to Longview, the decay and ruination of this plantation made itself evident. Thick green bushes with long branches covered the side of the road and obscured the view to the tea bushes. An old crumbling building where ration was once distributed was shut with a big padlock at its door. No person was visible on the road.

As I walked towards the home of the tea garden workers, I was struck by the silence, decay, and deterioration of the physical conditions of this abandoned tea plantation. The dilapidated workers' houses signaled a plantation in disrepair.

In 2020, in my field visits, I met Manish Gurung. A son of a retired worker, Manish informed me:

In Longview, usually during the harvest season, the management employs the workers for a period of a few months during the first and second flush. After that they stop paying the wages to return during the next harvest season. Most of the elders work for these few months. However, the youths refuse to be seasonally employed and have left in search of jobs. The older people are physically weak and unprepared for the belligerent work atmosphere in new workspaces. Therefore, they stay back. Only elders and children are left behind. Rest, everyone has left. (Interview with Nirvan Pradhan 21.11.2020)

In Longview, the youths leave not just to work outside but encouraged by their own parents are simply departing abandoned plantations which has become symbolic of every sort of a dead end. Manish continued:

I left Longview after repeated crises and adversity. I went to work in a call center in Delhi and it was a horrible experience. I worked night shifts and stayed with my friends. My salary was low, and I never got a raise. The heat and lack of a balanced diet deteriorated my health. I fell sick. Forced to recuperate, I shifted to Kathmandu. I stayed in my sister's house and oversaw the construction of her home. In Kathmandu, through my sister's relative, I was able to come across this person and he procured me a job as a chef in Incheon, Korea. I like my job in Korea as I earn a decent salary and face no discrimination. The weather is pleasant, and I have been able to save money. I am glad I went to Korea. I learnt so many skills. I have no intention of settling down in Darjeeling. There is nothing to do here and no work. Even my skills are considered useless here. Currently, I am getting my documents ready as my brother in Canada is making provisions for me to get a job there. (Interview with Nirvan Pradhan 21.10.2020)

When we concluded our conversation, I crossed the threshold of Manish's house and looked back to wish him the best for his onward journey. I told Manish I hoped to see him again - the next time he returned from Canada. He looked surprised and promptly responded that he was not planning to come back. His statement prompted me to question my own presupposition of him seeking to migrate for employment purposes. Rather, his response conveyed his intention of returning only after procuring a Canadian citizenship, which would require many years of inhabiting the country without leaving its shores.

Anthropologist Ghassan Hage has argued that migratory culture is haunted by the places or homes left behind. This hauntedness is not just a nostalgia for home, but rather is "the profound presence of another place in the everyday life of the migrant. Hage describes this as the 'vacillatory lifeworld' of the migratory subject" (Karlsson and Kikon 2017: 459). This captures the essence of the migratory cultures prevalent amongst young people. For Manish, the hardships he endured and life reversal he experienced in migration shaped his desire of moving and settling abroad. While scholars may understand abandonment as a large-scale social or historical process, Manish's reflection highlights the ways these processes are understood on the ground, by the people involved in them. The pain of unemployment at home was not just that Manish lacked an income, but that he was deprived of an opportunity to contribute to the common good (Sandel 2020). His skills were considered valuable and rewarded abroad, but at home it was "useless" - it failed to win social recognition and esteem. These local understandings of abandonment and hardships experienced, shape people's identities and displace their sense of belonging. These experiences of abandonment and subsequent migration, lead workers to view certain places as irredeemable, while others with hope and a sense of possibility.

In the context of migration in the Eastern Himalayas, social networks play a significant role in the massive migration of the labor force. Studies on migration in the Himalayan region have provided an important window in which people from Nepal migrate to India in search of employment due to the open-border policies under the friendship treaty signed by India and Nepal in 1950 (Thieme 2008; Thieme and Müller-Böker 2010; Sharma 2018). Around half of the international migrants work in the Gulf

countries, but India continues to be a popular destination for Nepalese international migrants. However, international migration from the Darjeeling region is also bolstered by social networks prevalent across national borders. Like Manish, young people from Darjeeling are increasingly using social networks in Nepal to look for employment opportunities abroad. The social networks consist of family, friends, and relatives as they are a primary source of information regarding jobs and a vital link to the destination countries. Large number of returnee migrants in Nepal contribute positively to the dissemination of information, provide knowledge in job opportunities, and link prospective migrations to the unknown destination countries. This reliability on social networks has benefited their kin in neighboring areas. For many aspiring migrants unable to procure jobs through channels in India due to high visa costs and recruitment fees, the flexible labor market in Nepal offers the best route to foreign destinations which would be otherwise closed to Indian citizens. Therefore, social networks across borders assist migrants with work prospects and adjusting in destination places.

Migration is impacting aspirations and development across the region. Many studies on remittances and migration have shown the ways in which transnational exchanges of goods, ideas, and emotions influence the cultural, political, and social life of natal communities (Levitt 1998; Pribilsky 2012; Wright 2020). As Upadhy and Rutten (2012) note, migration sets in motion a flow of economic resources in the form of remittances, but also a circulation of values, ideas, and aspirations. As migration grows in prevalence within a community, it changes values and cultural perceptions increasing the probability of future migration. The huge differences in wages, opportunities for learning skills, and upward social mobility motivates people to migrate. Many people in Darjeeling have benefited from migration and have chosen to pursue a second job after returning. Remittances are usually invested in building a home and establishing a small business. For instance, one of the contributing factors to the real estate boom in Siliguri has been remittances by migrant workers. Over the past couple of decades, a growing number of families are building houses in Siliguri because of the satisfactory health facilities, socio-cultural and linguistic reasons, and higher education opportunities for children.

Abandonment and subsequent migration have transformed people's identities and displaced their sense of belonging. Due to the glaring lack of unemployment opportunities outside of abandoned plantations, workers are resorting to international migration. In the Eastern Himalayas, social networks across national borders have helped reduce the costs of migration. Thus, the current flight of workers can be understood considering social networks across borders in places like Darjeeling.

New Recruiters, Old Patterns

Siliguri is a burgeoning city in the Eastern Himalayas connecting mainland India with the Northeast states. It houses many placement agencies and serves as a gateway for thousands of migrant workers from nearby regions. Connecting four international countries of Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, the volume of people moving from one destination to another has earned it the name of 'the migrant city.' In recent times, it has become a recruitment hotspot where most prospective migrants from abandoned plantations are joined by unemployed youths in meeting recruitment agents, processing documents including passport and labor permits, clearing interviews, acquiring travel insurance, and obtaining medical clearances.

In 2020, I sat in the Himalayan Talent Agency, a pioneering recruitment agency in Siliguri as aspiring migrants shuffled in preparing for job interviews. As employees sifted through resumes and prepared migrants for the questions and answers, a young man accompanied by his father angrily walked in. The fair skinned young man wore a black hoodie and his father, sweating profusely, went straight to the director of the agency: "We have already paid twelve lakh rupees in recruitment fees. Why are you charging us extra for the visa, health tests, and verification of documents?" Mr. Gurung, a sturdy man in his thirties and director of the agency, smiled sheepishly and replied:

That amount is the service fees for providing your son a labor permit. We have to liaison with recruiters and employers in destination countries to get the employment contract and the visa. You will have to bear the costs of processing documents, medical tests, and the rest. Our agency will not be paying for that. (Kamal, 18.11.2020)

The father of the young man expressed his astonishment in having to shell out more money despite paying the enormous recruitment fees. He left shaken with a confused look on his face.

Migrant workers experience a considerable amount of pre-departure exploitation. As an ethnographer working in recruitment zones, countless migrants who have shared some portion of their life with me, reveal they have been subjected to excessive recruitment fees, misrepresentation of the nature and terms of the work, non-payment of promised wages, cancellation of departures, and longer working hours than their contracts originally indicated. As migrants approach the departure dates, additional costs are demanded for document verification and medical tests. Recruiters demand and squeeze money at every stage of the pre-departure period. Most of the workers who migrate internationally are hired under a labor permit where a contract is framed under the jurisdiction of the hosting country. As such, many of the workers lack agency when it comes to negotiating better working conditions or asserting their basic rights in foreign states.

In the Eastern Himalayas, recruiters have played a historical role in facilitating migration to this region. When planters invested their capital in tea plantations, they needed laborers to work in the plantations. Capital investment in Darjeeling led to the creation of the labor market in Darjeeling. The labor markets created by the British colonial powers engineered flows of migrants through inducements by making people across national boundaries (Sharma 2016). The British relied on informal labor recruiters known as *sardars* to bring laborers to work in Darjeeling. Middleton's (2018) argument that Darjeeling's *sardari* system took distinct forms because of transnational migration, legality, and regulation is pertinent as they operated using their native ethnic ties, local knowledge, and cultural familiarity to lure people. They organized bands of *coolies* and transported them across the borders. It was a self-sustaining system as *sardars* hired laborers. Informal recruiters supplied laborers and government oversight was unnecessary. British officials ignored regulation of the system as it supplied laborers vital to the planters' interests.

Today, the *sardari* system has morphed into a placement agency system operating across the region. Just like the *sardars* of the past, agents

facilitate the migration of workers. Despite the passage of time, the absence of a pertinent labor migration law and lack of regulatory agencies inspecting the exploitation of workers plagues the system. A transnational labor market system exists, where coveted jobs in high paying countries are auctioned off to the highest bidder. People having access to financial capital pay higher recruitment fees can secure a relatively comfortable job (less physical work) in a foreign country. In their desperation and poverty, most of the workers from abandoned plantations migrate with a 'free visa' - one where they do not compensate the agent before their departure and are given a 'free tickets and a free visa.' However, agents receive payments when the migrant begins working in a foreign location. Moreover, aspiring migrants tend to underestimate the costs and risks associated with foreign employment. Hailing from cold-weather places like Darjeeling, heat stress insidiously affects the bodies of migrant workers laboring in the desert climates in the Middle East. Heat stress refers to the heat "received in excess of that which the body can tolerate, without physiological impairment" (Kjellstrom et al. 2016:98). Low skilled workers laboring in the construction sectors and agricultural fields are suffering from a deadly combination of *heat related stress* increasing occupational risks and vulnerability. Migrant workers complained of suffering from serious illnesses such as hyperthermia, stroke, heat exhaustion, severe dehydration, and the aggravation of heart, kidney, and psychiatric conditions. As workers are made commodities by being "torn from their life-worlds" (Tsing 2015:121) and moved across geographies to work in factories, intimate industries, and construction sectors, the effects of migration are felt in the *bodies* of the migrant workers.

Structural and systemic aspects facilitate the exploitative recruitment conditions. Recruiters are prominent in labor migration in Asia (Lindquist 2010; Lindquist et al. 2012; Kern and Böker 2015). In India, recruitment is regulated under The Emigration Act of 1983. The Emigration Act, 1983 (Section 10) stipulates that no recruitment agent shall carry on the business of recruitment except in accordance with a certificate issued on that behalf by the registering authority, i.e., the Protector General of Emigrants.⁶ However, aspiring migrants regularly resort to the services of unlicensed agencies. Since licensed recruitment agencies charge higher recruitment fees while promising lower salaries, most of the aspiring workers

choose unlicensed agents who charge lower fees while promising higher salaries. Moreover, age restrictions, soft skills, and gender considerations discourage formal agencies from accepting certain aspiring migrants who end up hiring the services of unlicensed agents. A lack of transparency and corruption in recruitment plagues the system. Direct hiring and government-to-government hiring of migrant workers is one way to contribute to the promotion of ethical recruitment. Lack of coordination amongst Asian countries further exacerbates this system. When Nepal announced a 'free visa-free ticket' or the 'zero cost migration' scheme - other South Asian countries offered to charge migration fees revealing the competition between countries in terms of supplying labor migrants (Sijapati, Ayub and Kharel 2017: 165). No cooperation exists between countries in terms of labor recruitment. Rather, nations contend to attract transnational companies and offer migrant workers as commodities at the cheapest price while enabling recruitment agencies to charge exorbitant recruitment fees.

In recent years, international efforts across governments to regulate ethical and fair recruitment have been promoted. Accordingly, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) was signed by over 193 nations. GCM Objective 6 states its aim to: "facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work."⁷ However, despite many states and organizations championing the elimination of recruitment fees, it has been operative only on certain recruitment corridors.⁸ Despite international efforts to improve conditions in the international labor market, at a local level there has been a shift from the demand driven work to supply driven work - to the point that workers are auctioned off to the lowest bidder. In places like Darjeeling, supply of labor has outstripped demand and vulnerable unemployed people are caught in exploitative recruitment systems. Since aspiring migrants have less access to information about recruitment practices, they become entangled in the corruption of recruitment agencies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how workers in abandoned plantations feel socially excluded and useless, struggling to maintain a livable life in such conditions. In these places, life devolves into a condition of "slow death" where the "deterioration of people in that population that is

very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (Berlant 2007:754). Cultures of migration in the Eastern Himalayas are engendered by socio-economic determinants of the region. Rising unemployment levels and structural-adjustment policies have choked off opportunities for the growing numbers of educated youth. If abandonment immobilizes people, then migration has kept people moving. But, just as the crisis on the ground worsens, an untapped future in recruitment zones becomes fertile grounds on which new *dreams* and desires are produced. As workers in abandoned plantations are forced off traditional forms of sustenance, this paper offers insights on how temporal problems are mitigated with the spatial solution of migration. Migration in the Eastern Himalayas is not a chaotic event but rather a well-defined social process whereby workers draw upon various sources of human and social capital to seek employment abroad. Workers are leaving with the conviction that they are leaving behind a place much worse than the one their parents and grandparents knew. Their voices are a description of the variegated desires emerging from imagining life afresh. To make these claims, I have drawn upon my research in the Eastern Himalaya to show how abandonment of plantations lead to decay of lives amid diminishing livable conditions.

Poverty, scarcity of employment opportunities, and lack of opportunities for upward career mobility are the main motivations for leaving such places. The untapped laborers are desperate to seek labor markets that can hire them in exchange for wages. This precarious employment, though uncertain, back-breaking, and often exploitative, is preferred - as families strategize for maintaining cyclical social demands for cash in funerals and marriages. Many of the workers disapprove of labor markets in India as they often end up in demeaning low paying jobs. Instead, higher wages, better working amenities, and opportunities for upward social and career mobility motivate workers to migrate abroad.

Places like Darjeeling are increasingly becoming exporters of *labor* as primary commodities. Tea is also exported, but workers even in functioning plantations have no prospects for social mobility. Migration offers an escape from this poverty trap, where access to capital and savings is possible. Thus, Darjeeling has become a recruiting hotspot for hiring cheap laborers who are then employed in foreign spaces of labor. There is a shift in the “spaces

for labor” (Besky 2017: 624), from the plantation homes in Darjeeling to the workers camps in the Middle east, flats in Sharjah, or servant quarters in Singapore. Their work spaces are now the construction sites of large scale skyscrapers in the Gulf Cooperation Council, as drivers ferrying building materials for roads and malls in Abu Dhabi, helpers working in various homes in Hong Kong, women employed as caregivers in the West Bank in Israel, girls working as domestic helps in gated communities in Singapore, and boys employed in oil refineries in Gulf nations. While transnational labor migration *into* the Eastern Himalayas in the nineteenth century was precipitated by the investment of capital, the current labor migration *from* the Eastern Himalayas have been engendered by the lack of capital reinvestments and state support for development.

Many recent studies of anthropology have emphasized on “dark anthropology” (Ortner, 2016) - focusing on “uncertainty, human suffering, environmental instability, inequality, oppression, and violence” (Lamb 2018:65). This essay contributes another aspect to inequality and oppression considering global labor regimes. It contributes towards studies focusing on why India’s unlikely democracy continues to thrive despite absolute poverty, insidious inequality effects, and rising subaltern movements (Sinha 2007). Rather than explaining it in terms of leaving (by elites), leaguings (by losers), and linking (by middle class), it shows the pressure on all sections of the society to be consistent. Labor export has also served as a ‘political safety valve’ - absorbing surplus labor in decaying capitalist spaces like Darjeeling. Many governments permit and promote labor migration and recruitment agencies because outmigration deflects popular energies from accumulating to a critical mass to which democracy would have to respond with significant social and political change.⁹

Workers escaping difficult conditions in the nineteenth century, came to a land that was still known by its former rulers - Muglan. Many people left their agricultural fields with promises of a better life to construct a new home and an identity abroad (Hutt 1998). Today, young people like Nawang strive for a distant land as a place where they can flourish. With them, Darjeeling is changing and viewed as a place which has outlived its purpose. Flourish here implies spaces of decent work, potentials for earning, saving, and favorable living conditions. This imagined,

utopian destination would be one where rather than facing chronic unemployment, incessant suffering and diminishing conditions of livability - they would be able to thrive. Butler (2004) has argued what makes a livable world is a broader question of ethics which we as scholars must reflect on as to what makes, or ought to make the lives of people livable. For many workers, livability is a wider political issue of social transformation, a reassessment of life that checks whether the conditions for flourishing of lives are available or absent. Migration is a challenge to the restrictive conditions for livable life and a route to enhance flourishing. In choosing to carve a new path, today's youths in Darjeeling are revealing a certain view of "what life is, and what it should be, but also of what constitutes the human, the distinctively human life, and what does not" (Butler 2004:17). A nostalgia for the future, despite the lack of a substantive definition, is what makes people strive for different work spaces and hopefully settle down. For now, they leave the old spaces of labor, in search of a new Muglan - with the hope it would be better than the previous one.

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Endnotes

1. The denial of bonuses at a season of celebrating yearly festivals interrupted workers' daily lives. The Payment of Bonus Act of 1965 stipulates the workers are to receive a minimum bonus at the rate of 8.33% of wages. While the owners wanted to pay a 15% bonus, the workers were demanding a 20% bonus. The breakdown of talks meant they could not celebrate their festival that year, despite the rise in the production of tea and a substantial increase in the volume of exports to foreign nations.
2. The number of international migrants is estimated to be almost 281 million globally, with nearly two-thirds being labor migrants (World Migration Report 2020). International migration is not uniform across the world but is shaped by political, climatic, economic, geographic, and demographic factors resulting in distinct migration patterns and migration corridors. This change over time can be found in the sociological structure of migrants from this region. Earlier, it was mainly a few ethnic groups from the Gorkha community who were poor and uneducated, incorporated in the British Army. Now, most of the migrants are from a broad spectrum of the community, with qualified and uneducated migrants, skilled and unskilled leaving for foreign employment.
3. Frequent changing of owners meant irregularities in paperwork and outstanding payment unrecorded. As such, many employees were not paid their provident funds on retirement. In my field visits, many of the older workers who had slogged in the plantation, requested me to investigate retirement funds which have not been paid. "Closure of TTCI Tea-gardens," Rajya Sabha, accessed 30 March 2021.
4. Since the Alchemist group owned Peshok, Kalej Valley, and Dooteriah, workers in these three plantations suffered similar effects of abandonment.
5. The government of West Bengal has initiated a scheme to provide "financial assistance to the workers of locked out industrial units". To be eligible, the factory should have been under closure/suspension of work/lock out for more than a year. There were considerable irregularities in the distribution of financial aid as certain workers complained of not receiving any funds. "Financial assistance to the workers of locked out industrial units," Labour Commissionerate, Labour Department, Government of West Bengal,

accessed 20 April 2021, <https://wbic.gov.in/fawloi>.

6. The Emigration Act of 1983 stipulates no employer shall recruit any citizen of India for employment in any country outside India except through a recruitment agent competent under this Act to make such recruitment. A formal recruitment agency must be registered with the Protector General of Immigrants. This requires paying a registration fee of Rs 25,000 and depositing a security amount of Rs 50 lakhs. This security amount can be used for meeting any expenses incurred in the event of the repatriation to India of any of the emigrants recruited by the agency. However, there are no upper limits to the recruitment fees.

7. UN member states have agreed on common goals on managing and regulating international migration. The non-binding Global Compact for Migration (GCM) encompasses 23 objectives. Objective 6 of the Global Compact on Migration commits to fair and ethical recruitment while safeguarding conditions that ensure decent work.

8. The “Montreal Recommendations on Recruitment: A Road Map towards Better Regulations” argues for various mechanisms to ensure fair and ethical recruitment through registration and licensing, rating, rewards and rankings for labor recruiters and bilateral, regional, and multilateral mechanisms.

9. The India Centre for Migration serves as a research think-tank to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, on all matters relating to international migration. Two of its objectives are: “To develop and sustain a national strategy to be globally competitive as a labour supplier” and “to project India as a supplier of skilled, trained and qualified workers.”

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