

Photo Essay

Building “Dyarā” away from Home: A visual essay on the Lives of Nepalese Migrants in the Western Himalayas

Garima Bhandari and Anindya Jayanta Mishra

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Roorkee

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2024.9240>

Abstract

The culture of migration is so deeply ingrained in the Nepal highlands, that individuals from marginalized households in the western provinces view migration to India as “a rite of passage to adulthood”. The western Himalayan region, due to its close proximity, attracts a significant number of Nepalese migrants during the non-agricultural season, where they engage in informal work opportunities and return to Nepal in the agricultural season. This type of migration is described in existing studies as *āune-jāne*, or coming and going, which signifies the temporary and circular nature of the movement. However, over time, migrants have adopted a different approach, with a greater emphasis on choosing temporary migration to Gulf countries while also spending significant time in the western Himalayas, leading to semi-permanent migration as compared to earlier, temporary migration. This semi-permanent migration serves as the central focus of this essay. This photo essay displays the Nepalese migrants who have migrated to the remote regions of Uttarakhand, a state in the western Himalayas of India, and who have been residing in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand for the past few years. It aims to provide a closer peek into the realm of the everyday practices of these migrant workers, focusing on how they build their living space on agricultural fields, which they refer to as “Dyarā”; cultivate the abandoned fallow lands; and are involved in vegetable cultivation. Further, it also tries to show how their children perceive the space and adapt to it.

Keywords

Dyarā; Garhwal Himalayas; Nepalese; migration; Uttarakhand

Recommended Citation

Bhandari, Garima and Anindya J. Mishra (2024). Building “Dyarā” away from Home: A visual essay on the Lives of Nepalese Migrants in the Western Himalayas. *HIMALAYA* 43(2): 41-63.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

India and Nepal share a historical and territorial contiguity, which has influenced migration patterns between the two neighboring south Asian countries. The labour migration history for livelihood strategies between Nepal and India spans around 200 years (Gill & Hoebink 2003). The Indo-Nepal Treaty signed in 1950 further enabled unrestricted movement between the two countries, allowing citizens the right to cross borders. By and large, a significant number of individuals migrate between India and Nepal without the need for formal documentation.

The culture of migration is so deeply ingrained in Nepal highlands that young men in the hills often see migrating to India as “a rite of passage to adulthood” (Sharma 2018: 87). Furthermore, these migrants play a significant role in supporting their households by sending remittances back home (Sharma 2018).

The western Himalayan region, due to its close proximity, attracts a significant number of migrants during the non-agricultural season, where they engage in informal work opportunities and then return to Nepal in the agricultural season. This type of migration is described as *āune-jāne* (coming and going), which signifies the temporary and circular nature of the movement (Bruslé 2008). However, over time, migrants have adopted a different approach, with a greater emphasis on choosing temporary migration to Gulf countries while also spending significant time in the western Himalayas, leading to semi-permanent migration as compared to the earlier temporary migration (Adhikari et al. 2023; Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security 2022). This is the central focus of this essay.

This photo essay focuses on the Nepalese migrants who have migrated to remote regions of Uttarakhand, a state in the western Himalayas of India, particularly those residing in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. It aims to provide a closer peek into the realm of the everyday practices of these migrant workers, focusing on how they build their living space on the agricultural lands, which they call “*Dyarā*”,

and cultivate their fields. The essay also tries to show how their children perceive the space and adapt to it.

Just as migration has become a deeply rooted phenomenon in Nepal, the remote rural regions of Uttarakhand are experiencing a similar trend of depopulation in numerous hilly villages where people are moving towards cities, leaving the villages. Photos for this essay were taken during fieldwork conducted in the Pauri district between September 2022 and May 2023. Pauri is a hilly district of Garhwal region, Uttarakhand that has experienced a significant exodus towards cities, resulting in the abandonment of many villages and the subsequent impact on agricultural landscapes (Rural Development and Migration Commission 2018). With fewer people engaging in agriculture, many agricultural lands have been left uncultivated and turned barren. These fallowed lands are now being cultivated by Nepalese migrants who come from a single province of Nepal, i.e. Rolpa. These migrants have settled in various locations such as deep gorges, between hilly villages, or along riverbanks where water streams are accessible for irrigation purposes. They are primarily involved in commercial vegetable production and sell their produce in nearby markets.

The migrant journeys of these cultivators are based on social networks and exploration, where they seek advice from friends and relatives who have already migrated before. Based on this advice young male members come to India and search for work mostly as individuals and explore the Garhwal region in search of daily wage work—*Dhyādi*—through which they develop connections with the locals. Over time when they gain the trust of the locals and form networks they are leased lands for cultivation, which they use for the cultivation of vegetables. As agriculture is a labor intensive occupation it requires a workforce to cultivate lands, to which male laborers bring their families from Nepal to Garhwal. In this process the migrant family members also join individuals to assist their work in this region.



Making of a “Dyarā”

Upon moving their families, one of the significant tasks for Nepalese migrants is to construct a house that provides them with protection from wild animals and extreme weather conditions. Despite being labeled as low-skilled, these migrants possess a wide range of skills, one of them is home construction. Many of them reside in agricultural lands where they construct semi-permanent homes from scratch, which are commonly referred to as Dyarā, meaning shelter in Nepali .

A Nepalese migrant's Dyarā
or house

The *Dyarā*, or self-built home, holds immense significance for these Nepalese migrants. For them, the construction of a house takes about two months during which occasionally they seek assistance from other residing Nepalese migrants and/or bring labor from Nepal. It is not just a shelter but a space which provides them with a sense of stability and belonging in a new place, particularly because they live there with their families. Unlike other migrants, they take special care to deck their *Dyarā* with essential items such as colourful string lights, Dish TV, flowers and beautiful paintings that bring a sense of comfort and familiarity which is deeply cherished and valued by the migrants.


A man applying plaster to his semi-built house structure.



Nepalese workers
converting the barren land
into fertile land

Converting Barren Into Fertile Lands

Due to the migration of people to cities, many lands in the villages of the Pauri district remain uncultivated and have become unproductive in the past few years. The remaining population in these rural areas mostly consists of the elderly, and people who could not migrate, who are not interested in farming. Consequently, lands have become overgrown with shrubs and weeds, and this requires time and effort to revive. According to Nepalese farmers, it takes approximately one month to revive these barren lands for cultivation. The man in the picture was working tirelessly for one month and more to transform the barren land into a fertile one. Such a process requires several individuals to undertake various tasks such as removing weeds, ploughing the land, and preparing it for vegetable cultivation.



The Nepalese cultivated lands, particularly in the deep gorges, offer a beautiful and diverse sight if viewed from a distance. The dark green areas are the areas that are actively managed by migrants. These areas are likely to be well-maintained, cultivated lands. Conversely, the brown shaded areas show the non-cultivated lands or areas where trees have become overgrown. These areas may appear more barren and less actively maintained compared to the green areas. The lush greenery of these cultivated lands provides a visual representation to the outsiders of the presence of Nepalese migrants in the terraced fields of the Himalayas.

A view of cultivated lands by Nepalese migrants



The hilly terrain of these regions presents various challenges in cultivating crops, making it more challenging than in the plains. Agricultural activities in these terraced lands primarily rely on manual labour. Migrant workers involved in farming practices use oxen for ploughing the fields, tend to crops by hand, and harvest the yield manually. These tasks are perceived as laborious and time-consuming, demanding the migrants' full dedication.

Women plucking mustard leaves



The cycle of vegetable cultivation and migrant labor aligns with the changing seasons, ensuring a diverse range of produce is harvested throughout the year. Each season brings forth different types of vegetables, and it is common to see migrants involved in the harvesting process. During the winter season, migrants can be seen plucking peas from the fields. Peas thrive in the colder weather, making it an ideal crop for that time of the year.

As the season moves into summer, migrants can be seen harvesting tomatoes, which require warmer temperatures for optimal growth. In the autumn season, migrants are often observed plucking green leafy vegetables such as spinach, kale, or mustard greens, which flourish during that time of the year. This practice not only caters to the market demands for fresh produce but also provides livelihood opportunities for migrants.

An old woman migrant plucking peas

From Fields To Market

In the evening, in accordance with the demands of nearby sellers in the market, the required quantity of harvested vegetables is gathered by the migrant laborers, which is then sent to the market the following morning. Since the fields and homes of these migrants are located away from the service roads, the laborers carry their loads for a few kilometres on foot until they reach the roads. From there, they rely on hired taxis or other vehicles to transport

the collected vegetables to the nearby markets in Pauri and Srinagar. One person, often the male or the adult member of the household, goes to the market to sell the produce. Meanwhile, the other family members are involved in working in the fields to cultivate or harvest the vegetables. This division of labor ensures that fresh produce reaches the markets in a timely manner, meeting the demands of both local sellers and consumers.

Man making a phone call to a driver





Fields are Playgrounds and Stones are Toys

From a young age, children accompany their parents to the agricultural fields, where they engage in play using mud and stones instead of more conventional soft toys. They spend a significant amount of their time in the fields, becoming accustomed to the distinct scent of mud from an early age. This early exposure to the agricultural lifestyle helps them adapt to it as they grow older, especially considering the limited availability of other children to play with in these rural areas.

A kid busy in playing with
stones

As they observe their parents' tasks in the field, the children mimic their actions, participating in activities such as carrying loads of vegetable bags or plucking vegetables. These playful imitations allow them to develop an understanding of the work involved in farming and they gradually become familiar with the nuances of farming and acquire practical knowledge that can prove valuable in their future endeavors.

A kid accompanying his mother in the field





Growing up surrounded by agricultural lands, which are often isolated and remote spaces, shapes the identity of migrant children differently. Their perception of Dyarā or home undergoes continuous transformations as their parents relocate for work opportunities. And in the process, they also acquire the ability to adjust to harsh living conditions, unpredictability and to a transience inherent in the life of a migrant.

A woman sitting in her Dyarā premises

CONCLUSION

This essay is a set of photographs that show the challenges faced by migrants and their ability to adapt and thrive in new environments in destination regions. It describes the migrant's story of resilience, determination and pursuit of a better life. The presence of Nepalese migrants across the western Himalayan region is widespread but their significance can be felt largely in depopulated regions such as Pauri, where the declining local population has resulted in many homes and lands being deserted. They are probably the last tillers of these fallow fields, which have been abandoned by their original owners. These Nepalese migrants play a crucial role in revitalizing the abandoned lands and contributing to the local economy through their hard work and agricultural activities. Their presence brings a liveliness to these isolated lands showcasing their perseverance and commitment to building a better future for themselves and their families. In this journey, their Dyarā brings comfort to them where they stay with their family in the destination region, which varies from the experiences of other migrants whose families stay behind in Nepal or areas of origin.

References

- Adhikari, J., Rai, M.K., Baral, C. and Subedi, M., 2023. Labour Migration from Nepal: Trends and Explanations. In *Migration in South Asia: IMISCOE Regional Reader*, pp. 67-81. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Bruslé, Tristan. 2008. "Choosing a destination and work". *Mountain Research and Development* 28 (3): 240-247.
- Gill, Gerard J., and Paul Hoebink. 2003. *Seasonal Labour Migration in rural Nepal: A preliminary overview*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security. 2022. "Nepal Labour Migration Report". Singhadarbar, Kathmandu
- Rural Development and Migration Commission. 2018. "Interim Report on the Status of Migration in Gram Panchayats of Uttarakhand". Pauri Garhwal, Uttarakhand.
- Sharma, Jeevan. 2018. *Crossing the border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal*. Philadelphia, US: Temple University Press.

Garima Bhandari is a doctoral research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India. Her research interests broadly concern migration, social change, development, and village studies. Her PhD topic focuses on Nepalese migrant workers and depopulating villages in Uttarakhand, India. Specifically, she is examining how villages in the western Himalayas have changed over time due to out-migration and the significance and temporal experiences of Nepalese migrant farm workers in such remote and rural regions of Uttarakhand.

Anindya Jayanta Mishra is a Professor of Sociology at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Roorkee, India. His research interests include Social Gerontology, Sociology of health, and Sociology of Work. Prof. Mishra has authored more than 30 papers in esteemed national and international journals and has made substantial contributions to various anthologies, projects and conferences.