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## Compte rendu de: Social Networks and Migration, Far West Nepalese Labour Migrants in Delhi

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***Social Networks and Migration. Far Western Nepalese Labour Migrants in Delhi* by Susan Thieme. Culture, Society, Environment; 7; Münster: LIT, 2006. ISBN 3825892468.**

Reviewed by Tristan Bruslé, CNRS-Himalaya, Villejuif.

*Social Networks and Migration, Far western Nepalese Labour Migrants in Delhi* is the first in-depth study about Nepalese migrants in the Indian capital. This work proves very useful for everyone interested both in socio-economic developments in Nepal (particularly with regards to the marginalised and under-developed far western part of the country) and in international migration from Nepal, which has nowadays become a major social phenomenon. It intends to “close a research gap” (p. 2) and the objective is indeed reached<sup>184</sup>.

Part of the author’s research team, from the Development Study Group at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich, is engaged in village studies in Bajura district. Her study in Delhi focuses on migrants from the very same villages. Her main aim is to understand “the process of migration and its contribution to the livelihoods of people from rural areas in Nepal” (p. 2). The author uses a very vast theoretical background, from the migration theory and Bourdieu’s theory of practice to the concepts of social capital and transnational spaces. The author chooses not to make any difference between temporary or circular migrations and more permanent migrations to Delhi. Seven months’ fieldwork was carried out in Delhi between 2001 and 2005, where meetings with about 500 migrants were held, followed by 128 in-depth interviews and 21 financial self-help group meetings which she attended. Migrants were mainly interviewed at their own homes, sometimes year after year, with the help of a translator and research assistant. Even though Thieme faced difficulties in meeting migrants, she was able to interview women migrants, who are the least known of Nepalese migrants. The average age of migrants is 28.6 years but no statistics are given for the castes to which the sample belongs.

The book is easy to follow thanks to clear introductions and conclusions. It starts with an overview of labour migration from Nepal and rightly underlines the blatant underestimations of the absentees. It then focuses on the theoretical tools and methodology used. The case study starts at Chapter Four, which describes migrant’s villages in Bajhang and Bajura districts. There follows a study of working and housing conditions

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<sup>184</sup> On the same subject, see also Thieme (2003), Thieme et Müller-Böker (2004) and Thieme, Bhattarai et al. (2005).

of migrants in Delhi. The focus is then on saving and loan strategies, with a special interest in saving and credit associations. Before concluding with results, future prospects and practical implications, remittance transfers to Nepal and the use of remittances are discussed. A good use of a bibliography about Nepal and Nepalese migrations and about international migration helps to understand the stakes involved in these movements.

The history of temporary labour migration is difficult to assess as written sources are scarce or nonexistent. The author states that nowadays labour migrations have been inherited from trade and Gurkha mercenary tradition. This is debatable, especially in the case of far western Nepal, which has rarely been an area from which recruits have joined Gurkha regiments. As the author says, some specific groups practised trade but this was never the case for everyone in the Nepalese hills and mountains. The origins of labour migration should thus be sought in seasonal movements from villages to the upper or the lower parts of the country, as part of using the different ecological belts in a complementary way. Seasonal moves in order to barter grain or ghee for salt or money occurred in Baitadi until the 1970s (field observations). "Oppressive land and labour policies and indebtedness" (pp. 12-13) also resulted in the Nepalese fleeing their country to India. As a result, according to the 2001 census, 3.3% of Nepal's total population live outside Nepal. But, in an interesting analysis taking into account official and non-official figures, the author shows that in 2001 between 6 and 14.7% of the total Nepalese population live abroad. "Taking only the population aged over 15 into account, it is estimated that 10 to 24% of them migrate out of Nepal" (p. 18), particularly from the Western Development Region, which sends 44% of all migrants while only containing 7.3% of the country's population. Thus, the statement "For many people, migration is not an exception but an integral part of their lives" (p. 21) gives us a clue as to the workings of Western rural areas.

The study of Bajura and Bajhang as poor and marginalised regions in Nepal reminds us that subsistence agriculture in this area only provides food for six months in the year. Therefore, people need to borrow money and grain so that "impoverishment, debt, unemployment, and (more recently) political turmoil are the main factors for large-scale labour migration" (p. 86). It would certainly have been useful to discuss the relations between low density, agricultural production and migration as a way of life. Mechanical links between land and migration need to be evaluated from a livelihood strategy angle, as the author says that in the villages of origin, "today migration has become already a long-standing tradition with well-oiled networks between villages in Nepal and places in India" (p. 86) and "a very important livelihood strategy" (p. 87). Even

though it is indeed a strategy, migration is not described as actually being chosen by individual migrants or their family: it is explained as a direct consequence of the socio-economic situation in far western Nepal. The author recognizes that international migration can be a “status symbol for the younger generation” (p. 11), but individual reasons leading people to go to India are not discussed as such. It is particularly striking that very few migrants explain their migration in terms of positive motivation; to buy land, in the Terai or in the hills or to send their children to school, are goals which are not expressed. Instead, migrants “felt compelled” (p. 96) to come to Delhi. At this point, I think it is necessary to go beyond what people say and try to understand what people do. I personally met migrants in Delhi and in Uttarakhand, who said that compulsion (*badhyatā*) brought them to India, but when asked about the available food or land, they admitted that they did not face any vital problems. It seems that it may be easier to explain migration, which is always depicted as something shameful and sometimes as a form of treason, as an obligation. A kind of official discourse circulates but it does not apply to all migrants. As far as women are concerned, I also think that the reason given for coming, i.e. medical treatment, should be reconsidered. For people from higher castes, and especially for women, living in town is not honourable (*baijjat*), although it may be easier than village life. Providing medical treatment as a reason for coming is a way of explaining one’s own migration as an obligation, whereas the real motive may be the desire to live in Delhi with one’s husband. More generally, the researcher must be careful not to completely endorse the migrant’s discourses in which the latter often describes himself/herself as a puppet whose actions are governed by socio-economic conditions. There is a real need to acknowledge the migrants’ freedom of action. And it is necessary to differentiate between migrants after two decades of migration: some may have bought land, whereas the majority has simply been surviving.

Social capital and networks make up the thread followed by the author to enter the world of migrants, and especially their working and living conditions in Delhi. According to Thieme, different kinds of capital (human, financial, natural, physical, symbolic and social) are used during “the whole migration process, access to jobs, remittance transfer and management of financial needs” (p. 65). Following theories on the perpetuation of migration, the author states that Delhi is chosen as a destination by migrants thanks to existing networks, even though further away destinations are known. The length of stay in Delhi appears to be highly variable though little is known about how often men actually come and go, depending on their situation in Nepal, their needs or the obligation to be in their village. In Delhi, jobs as night watchmen (*caukidār*) are always found through kin or friends (*āphno mānche*). However, the

*caukidār niche* exploited by Nepalis is like a trap: they all have the impression of not being able to get any other kind of job. They are stuck in the informal labour market (none of them work in private security firms), which means that “all migrants interviewed do not work under contract, lack social security, provident funds and weekend leaves” (p. 112). 60% of migrants interviewed have a second job, which is to clean cars in the morning. The pay for a watchman ranges from 800 to 4,000 Indian Rupees per month, whereas cleaning cars pays 150 IRs per car per month (each worker cleans eight to ten cars). It seems that only those who escape the *caukidār niche* can expect to earn more. This is the case of a Damai who managed to open a tailor shop and who now even employs four people. There is a strong sexual dimension to work, as women are usually employed as domestic workers in several households at a time. They earn “100 to 300 IRs per household per month, working one to two hours per day for each household” (p. 111). Despite the strong links between men, migrants from the same village are scattered over Delhi. They usually live in huts or slums, where they experience a “lack of sufficient basic facilities” (p. 121). Some more daring migrants may build their own dwelling, but most of the time migrants, who cook for themselves, invest a minimum in their dwellings. Life in Delhi is restricted to work and meeting with other migrants, especially during association meetings. The consumption of alcohol is very high and may restrict savings as it represents up to 10% of their earnings.

As regards caste rules, Thieme says that they are “less strict than in the villages in Nepal” (p. 123) but further on, she observes that, during an association meeting, “low cast people were not allowed to enter the room” (p. 158), and that “Dalits are allowed to enter in a room owned by a Chetri, as long as they are from the same village, and as long as they do not touch the water or sleeping mattress” (p. 123). According to my personal observations, if the city, as a modern place to live in, may bring some changes, radical changes have not been seen in private spaces; caste still determines with whom people live and eat.

As Thieme explores migrants’ living and working conditions in Delhi, she focuses on very rarely studied social practices. Studying “saving and credit associations provides fertile ground for analyzing the role of social capital in the provision of financial capital” (p. 128). The author brings to our attention a very detailed study of 13 financial self-help groups which are used by migrants who “often need more money than they earn per month” (p. 129). The informal credit market is the only way for migrants to have access to ready cash, either to start as a *caukidār* (this job has to be bought) or to “support their families back home and repay their debts” (p. 128). The author provides us with a very clear understanding of the workings of such groups, namely *ciṭ* (rotating savings and credit

association) and *sosāitī* (accumulating savings and credit association). Once again, Thieme shows the importance of social capital, since “trust based on kinship and village of origin” (p. 157) is needed to become a member of such groups. Having a job (and a salary) and a good reputation is also necessary. *Ciṭ* is “a group of individuals who have agreed to contribute financially at regular intervals to the creation of a fund” (p. 135). Every month, they meet, pay a fixed amount of money and agree to give a certain amount of money at an auction to the highest bidders. To get the money, one needs a guarantor, who becomes responsible for the payment of the monthly share. Major problems with the *ciṭ* are indeed defaulted payments: once they get their money, many migrants go back home and do not pay their share. The guarantor and the chairman of the *ciṭ* may thus become heavily indebted. The *ciṭ* comes to a formal end when all members have received money. Thieme states that only one out of three *ciṭ*s visited works smoothly. Compared to a *ciṭ*, *sosāitī* is different in that money “is accumulated by earning money with interest on loans” (p. 145). At the beginning of the *sosāitī*, each member gives a certain amount of money, which is distributed every month to members, with an interest rate of 2 to 10%. There is no deadline for repayment. At the end of the *sosāitī*, when members agree to disband it, money is either distributed to each member or invested in the village. The *sosāitī* of *Gothpada* (Bajura) exemplifies the notion of transnational space as this group is run by both migrants and villagers, and the money earned by the *sosāitī* pays the schoolteacher, food reserves and its manager. Links between Delhi and the village are therefore very strong: people borrow rice in the village and pay it back in Delhi. *Sosāitīs* are much more successful than *ciṭ*s. Some are even run exclusively by women and by Dalits and migrants may be part of different self-help groups. Even if belonging to such a group allows migrants to have access to credit, it also forces them to follow institutionalised rules and to take on “contractual obligations”. Risks exist but, more than financial support, “*ciṭ*s and *sosāitīs* are a way of expressing trust and maintaining social capital between individuals” (pp. 180-182). Each meeting is a social event, “a focal point” (p. 180) in migrants’ lives, when alcohol consumption is high. At last, self-help groups offer some protection to migrants, who are not able to rely on the Nepalese embassy or are not willing to join Nepalese workers associations.

Even if Thieme recognizes that evaluating the migrants’ savings and remittances is “very challenging”, and because “there is no fixed pattern of sending money home” (p. 169), the author estimates that each migrant sends about 5,121 IRs to his/her village, notwithstanding collective remittances as mentioned in the *Gothpada sosāitī* case. With no access to commercial banking, money travels by hand, with the risk of it being stolen or lost. The money is “mainly spent on consumption, e.g., for food

and clothes, to repay debts, and also to provide cash for livestock and fertilizers. Large amounts are also spent on marriages, rituals, religious festivals and funerals for the closest family members as well as the extended family” (p. 170). If some money is left, this is used for children’s education and the purchase of land. Here it would have been interesting to know the exact proportion of migrants who had reached these goals, after years of migration. Concluding on the “pluri-locality of migrants and non-migrating family members’ lives”, when “the household spans between Far West Nepal and Delhi” (pp. 176-177), Thieme insists on the fact that migrants never consider Delhi as “home” (*ghar*). Attachment to their village remains indisputable. They always expect to return to Nepal, to the hills or the Terai. The book ends with policy recommendations such as the need for accurate statistics about migration from Nepal to India and the necessary control of the use of remittances. For Thieme, migration research should contribute to policy-making at national level, but should also work hand-in-hand with local NGOs (which is what Thieme does with the South Asian Study Center based in Delhi).

At a time when international labour migration from Nepal is considered by Nepalese politicians to be the solution to Nepal’s underdevelopment, this study helps to understand how migrants cope with life in a foreign land, and how mobility is used as a livelihood strategy. The whole book is very edifying and it will certainly remain a reference in Nepalese migration studies, though a few points could be improved. First of all, the lack of general statistics on the migrants interviewed, especially in terms of their caste and socio-economic background, does not enable the reader to fully understand the actual differences between migrants. It is as if all migrants had the same village background, the same objectives regarding migration and as if they had achieved the same goals. A thorough look at their life stories, in a diachronic approach to migration, might have shown that the migrants’ situation can evolve. As the years go by, migrants are gaining experience. For some of them, Delhi can become an attractive place to live. Some even go as far as settling more permanently in the Indian capital (as might be the case for the tailor mentioned on p. 113). I assume that the researcher has to focus on more marginal social facts, such as migrants who move away from the path traced by the older generation and decide to leave their “traditional” niche to fulfil higher ambitions. Some manage to buy land in the Terai, others remain poor throughout their lives. In a more general way, one needs to consider the migrant as an actor who has power over his/her fate, even though he/she often denies it. Secondly, Thieme, as a geographer, could have further developed relations to places, in particular to the urban area of Delhi. Clues are given but they are scattered throughout the book. For example, she stresses that “the longer migrants

live in Delhi, the more ambivalent their attitude is towards life in Delhi” (p. 98): this could have been studied in greater depth. It would have been interesting to compare different discourses about Delhi and practices in Delhi, in relation to personal migration histories. Thirdly, Thieme is right in explaining the migration process through the social capital theory. Nevertheless, I believe that networks do not explain everything. The individual ability to move to a foreign land, personal motivation and the desire to escape one’s own society are useful clues as to how migrants cope in a foreign environment. If networking is almost compulsory if one is not to get lost in a metropolis such as Delhi, one must not forget that, after years of living in a foreign land, one can build one’s own territory which becomes as familiar as the village. Space is appropriated, Hindi is spoken and links are created. Feeling at ease in Delhi also explains why migrants keep coming to the same place to earn their livelihood.

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