The Nepali diaspora and the feminisation of agriculture

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Introduction

• By some counts approximately 4 million adult males have left Nepal to engage in wage labour in Middle East and elsewhere. About 80% in the Middle East. 2.1million in Gulf.

• Remittances from Nepalis outside Nepal represent over 25% of Nepal’s GDP. Agriculture about 45% (largest contribution to GDP)

• Huge implications to social conditions in rural Nepal, including impacts on women’s workloads
• Resulting “feminisation of agriculture” one major impact

• Many other changes in recent years. The presentation uses the diaspora and “remittance economy” and their links with feminisation of agriculture as a lens to explore these wider changes. (A working title)

• Why us?
Outline

• Big picture of changing Nepal

• Case study focusing on long term familiarity with study site in Lamjung (20 years)

• Concluding comments: summary and implications
Changing Nepal

• 1980s: very limited transport and communications even for villages near Kathmandu

• Radio Nepal 1952; Nepal Television 1985; essentially monopolies and tightly government controlled until 1990

• No electricity in most areas

• Now: mobile phones, satellite TV even in remote villages; many more roads

• Kathmandu then and now
Major change factors

Civil unrest at least since 1990

- Revolution in 1990; end of Panchayat system – constitutional monarchy
- Maoists since 1996
- Murder of royal family (2001)
- Civil war builds up
- End of monarchy (2007)
- Continuing constitutional crisis
• Geopolitics (India and China)

• Ethnic identity politics

• No elected local government at VDC and DDC

• Decline of tourism

• Massive increase in NGOs (42,000+) and development aid

• Infrastructure
CASE STUDY:

DHAMILIKUWA VDC, LAMJUNG DISTRICT NEPAL

Local manifestations in Dhamilikuwa VDC in relation to the wider changes in Nepal?
Longitudinal, ethnographic, using multiple sources of data:

- Dhamilikuwa VDC [wards - 1 & 2]
  Lamjung, mid-hills in NEPAL

- Case study of 3 hamlets

- Household survey interview of 201 hhs
  (a) Mixed ethnicity/ wealth, dominated by higher caste (118 hhs),
  (b) Ethnic groups migrated from upper hills (46 (hhs) and
  (c) Low caste/ poor groups (37 hhs)

- Participant observation, Focus group & workshop & Interviews (multi-scale)

Research over 20 years

- 1993/1994: Research exploring communities in conservation (BSc)

- 1998/1999: Research exploring the politics of NRM (MEEM)

- 2005 – 2007: UQ postdoc into the political ecology of CBNRM

- 2012/2013: Endeavour research fellowship: climate justice

- 2013 – 2018: ACIAR funded research - food security and livelihood
Persistence & change at the local level: THREE major themes

1. REMITTANCE ECONOMY & FEMINISATION OF SOCIETY
2. LAND ABANDONMENT
3. COLLAPSE OF LOCAL DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM

Wide ranging implications …

UNPRECEDEDENTED SOCIAL, ECONOMIC & ENVIRONMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS
1. REMITTANCE ECONOMY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

a) Remittance has a direct positive impacts on household’s economic affair

b) High level of recognition of the importance of remittances in the narrative of growth & development of family and communities

c) Negative impacts on facilities & societies mentioned, but NOT amplified

d) Strong interest of having men in villages, and a sense of collective shame & fear of growing family dependence on remittances
Migrant rights, or wrongs?
SLAVES, DEATHS & DYING: Misery of Nepalese migrant workers
Dreams undone ... yet!

- Many people heard of deaths, illness due to heat & depression – RETURNED HOME

- Also some awareness of risks:
  - Mistreatment, beating & exploitation
  - No full salary
  - Long hours of work beyond their contract
  - No passport
  - Sexual harassment

- Dilemma – poverty at home or slavery abroad?

- Yet, these risks have not seem to have discouraged many youths from dreaming of going to work overseas

- And for low caste, poorer groups, very few adults are able to go overseas for work
FEMINISATION of society (& agriculture)

- Over 80% households have at least one male adult overseas, while only a few females left for overseas work – villages full of women

- Roles of women have shifted, creating issues of gender injustice
  - Village full of women largely looking after children & elderly
  - Some hard agricultural work, previously done only by men, additional workload to women – ploughing the field (against social norms)
  - Women involved in cremation (against social norms)
  - Financial manager – women cooperatives
Female ploughing agricultural field

it is against the local norms ...
does this matter to societies that much now?
Daily life & lifestyles of women changed dramatically:

• Daily activities involve, besides the above, watching TV programs (mostly Indian and Nepal serials)

• Many women seem to cry and laugh with the ups and downs with the characters of popular TV serials

• Some instances of social conflict emerged due to having different perspectives on TV characters and unfolding events in drama

• Use of mobile phone, facebook & entertainment events risen
Major decisions are still controlled by men ...

- Women now make most operational decisions of households e.g. what food to buy

- Major decisions such as buying a house or land (and migrate), they are instructed by men from overseas or they wait until their counterpart returns on leave

- Village women still seen unwilling, or incapable of running political office

- Local political decisions still captured by men, mostly elderly and high class men
Male domination in decision making ...  Women expected to do more ...
Women’s finance cooperative

Most remittance income used for household purposes, education and buying house/land – enhancing ‘social prestige’
Collapse of family as an institution...

• Marriage broken, lost income
• Polygyny & inter caste marriage
• Family structure is breaking down as children grow up without father
• No wife and children accompanying men
• Women in major psychological stress and no support in time of need
• Sexual issues, views on some evidence of prostitution elsewhere
• Parameters for social inequality changed – wealth as overriding factor rather than caste
2. Land abandonment & underutilisation

Very fertile land being left fallow in a country that has acute food insecurity

- No / expensive labour
- No willingness to engage in hard work
- Agriculture is not a rewarding profession anymore
- Ability to buy food from the nearby market
Causes of land abandonment:

a) socio-economic: Out-migration and decreased household income from agriculture

b) decreasing productivity - Low return on investment, and difficult access to farm inputs/technology

c) cultural and political - changing food habit, agriculture perceived as low profession, not rewarding, forced due to political clashes and insecurity

d) bio-physical - distant/scattered, inaccessible marginal land, small parcel, vulnerable to erosion, and wildlife damages

Consequences of abandonment:

a) Increased food insecurity due to reduced local food production

b) Opportunity for forestry, but risk of weeds, erosion etc. from underutilised agriculture land

c) Loss of culture, land-based identity and a sense of belonging to land

d) Loss of farm employment opportunities/income and changing interdependent relations in villages
3. Collapse of local democratic space ...

- No elected government for over a decade

- Local government (Village Development Committee & District Development Committee) run by bureaucrats, with some inputs from some members of major political parties (mostly male)

- Focus on national political crisis, so centralization of almost everything

- Local voices & concerns are largely ignored;

- No effective deliberation of what’s happening at the local level

- Wealth maximization has become the focus & the indicator of development, at the expense of dealing with social impacts
Some key lessons …

1. Remittance is not always that great
   - Disconnect between the amplified narrative of remittance as overly good without critically understanding and addressing social issues at the local level

2. While overdependence on remittance is dangerous & there seems to be some collective sense of fear and shame, dalits and poorest of the poor seem to be left out from the benefits of remittance boom

3. Increasing gender injustices
   - Dilemma exists: increasing food insecurity vs. underutilisation of land
   - Collapse in the use of local democratic space to articulate, understand and address social issues
Conclusions

• Case study not typical of all villages, but fairly common and shows trends

• Reflects massive changes, but not equal

• Globalisation and remittance income have led to improvement of many lives, but unequal benefits and significant downsides

• Disconnect: Political discourse ignores local realities

• Some poor haven’t benefited; perhaps even worse off
• Changing significance of caste and kinship

• Change to rural women’s lives, but does this change status?

• Globalisation and diaspora: both cause and effect of each other
Persistence and change:

- Women in decision making not changed
- Lower caste disadvantage persists
- Poverty gap enhanced