Identity, Movement and Belonging In a Land of Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Nepali Workforce in Leh, Ladakh

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Identity, Movement and Belonging In a Land of Tradition:
A Critical Examination of the Nepali Workforce in Leh, Ladakh
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Reference Maps

Map of Ladakh’s major cities and sites.

Map of India depicting Ladakh’s unique location at the Northernmost and mountainous tip of the country.
Abstract

In recent years, Nepal has emerged at the forefront of the international labor market with a growing and continuous out-flow of migrant laborers. Such migratory patterns have landed people from Nepal in jobs all over the world; from power plants in Dubai to coffee shops in Toronto. This study situates the phenomenon of Nepali migrant labor in the rapidly urbanizing capital of Leh, Ladakh, and examines the experiences of identity and complexities of belonging within the transnational system of migration.

I was prompted to conduct research in Leh after having heard from a local man that there was a small “slum” forming on the Northern edge of the city. He told me the so-called slum was primarily comprised of migrant laborers from rural India and Nepal. After hearing this, I was compelled to investigate the living conditions of Nepali workers in Ladakh. Further provocation to conduct my studies in Leh was incited upon realizing that while there is a vast body of knowledge concerning the reasons for migration, the experiences of migrant laborers at their respective labor destinations is severely understudied.
Methodology

The research presented here was conducted through 32 extensive interviews and conversations with Nepali migrant laborers, Nepali families, Indian business owners, Indian Army officials, as well as tourists and local Ladakhis. Unfortunately, due to the tragic and unforeseen circumstances of the earthquake in Nepal, my contribution to the greater mountain migration body of knowledge could amount to nothing more than a brief overview of the Nepali condition in Leh. Regardless, I hope this text can provide a glimpse into the lives of Nepali migrants that reflects upon broader understandings of transnational movement.

I decided to emphasize the stories of individual migrants in effort to project the voices of such migrant workers who have been marginalized and silenced through their movement from Nepal to India. There is a vast collection of surveys and data that offer in-depth economic perspectives on the issue of out-migration from Nepal, but the paper at hand is an attempt to offset such studies in order to connect the numbers to the narrative. While quantifiable data is imperative in realizing the patterns of migration to and from Nepal, it is my intent to extract an experiential and theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of labor migration. I sought to answer the following research question: Does the Nepali experience of labor migration to Leh, Ladakh, differ from understandings of the exploitative transnational migratory system and if so, how?
“No one listens to us. We’re not even considered human beings in Leh.”
-Nepali migrant laborer in Leh, Ladakh.

The terrain in Ladakh far surpasses that which words could ever fully comprehend – it is some of the harshest beauty one could have the pleasure of embracing. Characterized by cheek-splitting winds, desert-cracked ground, jagged white-capped peaks, mounting rockslides, and hasty waters, Ladakh is as phenomenal as it is forbidding. The complex landscape of Ladakh is mirrored by an equally diverse population of people. With the Tibetan plateau to the east, the Pakistani state to the west, and the Indian subcontinent to the South, the semi-autonomous Tibetanoid borderland of Ladakh is comprised of an amalgamation of people from each of these areas and beyond. The capital of Leh Town lies at the heart of Ladakh, embodying the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of the area. Leh is an increasingly cosmopolitan place where one can find local Ladakhis sipping butter tea with neighbors, shoe-shiners from Rajasthan conversing with Kashmiri businessmen, Tibetan refugees bartering with foreign tourists, and whole Nepali families working construction alongside young Bihari men. Such interactions among different people have become relatively commonplace in Leh Town. But while this coexistence might strike a visitor as somewhat utopian, the relationships amongst people in Leh are in fact exceptionally more complex than they appear.

Through the research presented in this study, I found that the Nepali experience of labor migration to Leh, Ladakh, is highly unique within understandings of the exploitative transnational migratory system whereby Nepali people in Leh are outwardly revered as laborers, but internally marginalized as members of an otherwise welcoming Tibetanoid Himalayan community.

A Tradition of Hospitality

People in Ladakh are often thought to possess a spirit unlike any other people – a spirit characterized by a unique sort of “mountain kindness.” Ladakhis are praised by scholars for their humble traditions and welcoming demeanors. In her renowned book, Ancient Futures, Helena Norberg-Hodge describes her experience of the Ladakhi character as she writes,

In traditional Ladakh, aggression of any sort is exceptionally rare: rare enough to say that it is virtually nonexistent…the feeling that peace is better than conflict is deeply ingrained…from family and neighbors to members of other villages and even strangers, Ladakhis are aware that helping others is in their own interest. A high yield for one farmer does not entail a low yield for another. Mutual aid, rather than competition, shapes the economy. It is, in other words, a synergistic society. (Norberg-Hodge, 1991 p. 49-51)

This kind of consideration is often thought to translate into the lives of migrants in Leh town. Tsering Motup, owner of Zambhala Hotel on Changspa Road, claims that Ladakhis are exceptionally hospitable towards Nepali migrants. He told me, “We have a system here in Ladakh. We share food and drink with our laborers. They’re hardly treated any differently than the local laborers.” Perhaps this system of hospitality applies to Nepalis migrants when they are ‘on the job,’ but such claims did not manifest in the conversations I shared with migrants about their lived experiences. Nevertheless, other locals assured that despite the fact that Leh is changing and urbanizing rather quickly, the root of the tradition of hospitality still remains.
Padma shared that comparatively, migrants in Leh are treated courteously and are shown incredible respect. She commented,

Ladakhi people really treat migrant laborers with respect, especially compared to people from Delhi and elsewhere. We give our workers tea and bread in the morning. It depends on the family, how generous they are with giving laborers breaks and meals, but in general people in Ladakh are so compassionate. And the workers here make double that they do anywhere else in India! Down south, laborers have to bring water and food with them to their jobs because the employer would never provide that. But here, workers get water, tea, food, comfort – they are treated very highly.

Many locals made similar comments about migrants in Leh, but such remarks of hospitality are hard to believe in light of the on-going conversation of Nepali exploitation within the transnational labor market.

**The Discourse of Exploitation and Slave Labor**

Commonly perceived stereotypes of Nepali workers within the configuration of transnational movement render them a population willing to work dangerous and dirty jobs, subsequently depicting Nepali migrants as an exploited labor force. Individuals from Nepal are readily deployed to wealthy countries desiring of ‘cheap’ labor. Malaysia, Dubai, and other Gulf countries are popular destinations, and are notoriously reported to exploit Nepali laborers. In fact, a recent article entitled, *The High Cost of Cheap Labor*, from *The Record*, an online magazine based in Kathmandu, stated that the government of Nepal banned women under 30 from migrating to the Gulf for fear of exploitation (Adhikari, *The Record*, 2014). Despite potentially exploitative conditions, many Nepalis continue to go because of temptingly high wages. The cost and the details of getting there, however, are almost impossible to manage so many people decide to take out loans, or use ‘manpower’ companies in order to land themselves a position abroad. Manpower agencies – companies built to deploy laborers from Nepal – have scattered themselves around the Kathmandu Valley, sending hundreds of people for labor every week.

The thought of migration is alluring to some, but others find the concept entirely impractical. Raju Sherpa, for example, argues fervently against migrant labor. He believes that the negatives largely outweigh the positives no matter where one decides to go. In his words,

Everyday it’s getting harder to live in Nepal. There is no constitution, and a bad economy. But everyday thousands of people are going abroad to work labor jobs in Qatar, Dubai, and other Gulf countries and it’s so dangerous because you can never be sure. The manpower companies, they promise you something great but more often than not it’s all a big scam and there is nothing when you get to your destination. Nepalis die on the job because of the sun, because of the dry land, and because of harsh labor work. People get pushed to the limit and die. Some people just die in their sleep from exhaustion and others are sent home in boxes. People know the horrors, but they still go for the possibility of a better life. Yeah sure, a few hundred get what they’re promised abroad, but others are left in a bizarre condition. Don’t go abroad for work. You can find anything here in Nepal. *Don’t go* is the basic mental philosophy of people who have returned.

Sherpa also shared a story of a good friend who returned from Dubai after two years severely wounded and changed forever. Accounts like this one are far from unique. In fact, some say the migrant condition is so dire, that Nepal’s international airport is in need of a morgue to house the
bodies of workers shipped home. Adhikari writes, “Three to seven arrive each day…the director general of Nepal’s Department of Labour has said most deaths abroad should be treated as murder” (Adhikari, *The Record*, 2014). The rampant exploitation faced by migrants has driven human rights activists to denounce labor migration altogether and has prompted critical and postcolonial theorists to examine the abuse of migrant workers in the context of a violent transnational movement.

The most common theoretical understandings of transnational migratory labor are that of a rampant commodification and exploitation of the laboring body. Author Leila Neti, for instance, writes that, “the uneven social terrain of transnational modernity is produced by a singular notion of humanity as *recyclable*” (Neti, 2009, p. 194). Neti’s text, *The Human Recycled: Insecurity in the Transnational Moment*, can be understood in lieu of Michael Foucalt’s *Biopolitics*, wherein formations of life and death have been reconceptualized against a backdrop of migration, and transnational migrants can be understood as commodities. Neti writes that when observing discourses of migration, one will surely be “concerned with the ethical paradoxes that confront those whose lives are considered expendable within the economies of transnationalism” (Neti, 2009, p. 195).

The exploitation of Nepali migrants is not limited to the Gulf, although the area has received immense media attention in recent years. The discourse of slave labor is beginning to surface in Ladakh, as well, as the population of Nepalis and other migrants increases every year. After hearing a young Nepali migrant woman in Leh refer to herself as a “coolie,” Siddhartha observed that perhaps the labor trade between Nepal and Ladakh is starting to mirror the Indian slave labor trade. He said,

*Coolie* is synonymous with people today doing manual labor – it’s like a polite term for slavery. It’s what people used to call the indentured laborers taken from India to the Caribbean by the British. The Nepalis migrating into terrible conditions like the ones here in Ladakh are quite familiar. It’s happened before. Like old wine in a new bottle.

Sid’s comment is similar to that of many others who have observed the reality of migration. Yet the impression within the local community is still such that the migrant population in Leh is by no means exploited. In order to understand the positionality of Nepali migrants and their experiences of exploitation, it is first important to understand the general patterns of migration that are being woven into the fabric of Leh and the role of Nepali migrants within such a complex framework.

**Patterns of Migration to Leh**

The dramatic swell of migrant laborers to Leh in recent years is comprised of individuals from all over South Asia including Nepal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and many other parts of Jammu & Kashmir (Sainkupar-Ranee, p. 94). Becky Normand, a leading figure at the SECMOL campus in Phey Village, says that the formation of such a community is not necessarily unique. She commented, “Leh became a hub just like any other popular migrant destination came about. Once people start immigrating, they set up connections and communities and then more and more people become attracted to that area.” People come to Leh for a variety of reasons. Some people for economic reasons, and others the thrill of an adventure. Most migrations are voluntary,
but in some cases, Leh has become a refuge for individuals living under stressful circumstances. I encountered a young Kashmiri man named Kabir who runs a pashmina scarf shop near the Leh market with his cousin every summer. For them, Leh was not an option, but a necessity. After giving me an extensive history lesson on Kashmiri-Indian-Chinese-Pakistani relations, he stated,

We are here for 8 months because the conditions in the summer in Kashmir are much too dangerous for young men. Just the other day in Kashmir there was a raid in the city by army men and a young 14-year-old boy was shot dead. So our families send us here to run this business. It has been in our family for generations. But this is not where I want to be. We do not like it here. When we go home after a long time here, our families tell us that our faces have changed. They say we look so dull. People here are not so friendly like they are in Kashmir. Everyone at home is so lively. We spend our time here talking about our childhoods and remembering the good old days. Here it is too cold and too harsh for life. And it’s so hard to work here because of the altitude.

Kabir added that he has never experienced any kind of discrimination in Leh. His story is disheartening, but he lives comfortably as an outsider in Ladakh, which is more than some can say. Whether eagerly or not, the great majority of people migrate because the economic or administrative conditions in their native homes are nothing short of dire. The areas that supply the most laboring bodies to Ladakh are Bihar and Nepal. One can find Nepali and Bihari people “on every corner of Ladakh,” told a young Nepali man, “even behind these mountains you will find them. We are everywhere from here to Hemis.” Comparatively, both Nepal and Bihar are severely overpopulated and impoverished areas, which is presumably why so many people are leaving to find work elsewhere. Most people who come from Nepal are from the foothills of the Himalayas, in villages three to four hours outside of Kathmandu.

A few young Nepali men working at Gesmo Restaurant – a quaint little joint just south of the main Leh Town market – offered some suggestions as to the patterns of Nepali migration. Suraj Lama, a 27-year-old Tamang from Bara Bishe, Nepal, said that everyone working at Gesmo Restaurant is a seasonal Nepali migrant. “We’re all seasonal migrants. We spend our summers working in Ladakh and the winters in Goa. Basically, we follow the tourists,” he said. This pattern of seasonal labor migration is extremely common amongst male Nepalis. Pairing Goa with Ladakh is practical, they explained, because Leh’s winter off-season falls directly while Goa’s beach season is in full swing – and vice versa.

Ram Tamang, a 25-year-old waiter at Gesmo Restaurant who has been participating in seasonal labor from Goa to Ladakh since he was 19, said that he started working in India because, the tourist season in Nepal only lasts 2 or 3 months, whereas the high season in Goa and Ladakh lasts for 5 or 6 months. When asked which location he preferred, Tamang noted, “I like Goa and Ladakh for different reasons. They both have their own beauty. I really do like chilling in the sun and drinking beer on the beach, but here we have fun too. The mountains are great and we play a lot of music.” Besides the appealing environment and jolly pastimes, a few of the Gesmo Restaurant employees remarked that they prefer working in India because they make much higher wages than they would elsewhere. Additionally, they noted the ease of traveling home from India, versus somewhere like the Middle East. “All we have to do is cross the border and pay a little money” chimed Tamang, whose remittances to family in Nepal are the sole reason he works seasonal labor, “but to go home to visit family from the Gulf it costs so much money to travel and takes a long time.”
Familial Migration

Migration scholarship often concerns itself with the notion of migrant labor as masculinized and, consequently, the dismantling of Nepali families. Close attention is often paid to the women and children who are left behind when husbands and fathers find work abroad. However, Nepalis in Ladakh tell a different story – that of familial migration. There are just as many, if not more Nepali families living permanently in Leh Town than there are individuals. Often times, families of 10 to 15 people will move to Ladakh together. This system of family migration has become a catalyst for cultural awareness and cultural preservation initiatives within Nepali communities residing in Leh, whereby networks of families from Nepal are able to surround themselves with Nepali tradition, language, and religion. Ganga Kumari, a Nepali mother who has spent over 17 years in Leh stated, “We are happy to have been born in Nepal. Here in this home, we try to promote Nepali culture. We speak Nepali, eat Nepali foods, and we are Hindus.” Many other Nepali families say the same and do their best to maintain a familiar culture. Although the community of Nepalis in Leh have been crucial in supporting one another, and maintaining a sense of Nepali identity, the system of familial migration has made many people weary about Nepalis in Leh.

In recent years, migrant families have raised some speculation around child labor practices. When wandering around the Leh market, one can find a handful of Nepali families working on construction sites with their children alongside. While this is the case, most Nepali children are not forced into employment by their relatives. In fact, the education of children is of utmost importance for migrant Nepali families in Leh. So much so, that some are willing to sacrifice pieces of the culture they have tried so hard to maintain just to send their children to school. Normand of SECMOL shared her experience of a woman who could not afford to send her children to a private institution, and decided to make a sacrifice of religious tradition. She said, “I know a Nepali woman who is sending her kids to a Christian school and one time I asked her, don’t you mind that your kids are getting pumped full of Christianity? She told me that nobody else was offering to send her children to private school for free. She really had no other choice.” Accounts like these are becoming more and more common, especially with the growing influence of the Moravian Mission School, a Christian institution that has created a hostel entirely for Nepali children of migrant families.

The Revered Nepali

The Nepali migrant has developed a promising work reputation amongst local Ladakhis. So much so, in fact, that many people prefer to hire Nepali laborers over people from elsewhere because they are known to be the most capable, friendly, humble, and hard-working population of migrants. Tsewang Dorje, a 35-year-old Ladakhi and manager of Nature’s Tracks Culture and Adventure Tours of Ladakh spoke of the revered Nepali population in Leh. He said,

Nepalis are in high demand because they are so geographically fit to work here. Many people cant work as hard as Nepalis in such high altitude. The Biharis and other lowland people don’t work properly in the altitude. They take time to get acclimatized. Nepalis work honestly, too. That’s why so many people take them to the villages to work for them and many stay and live in the villages permanently. Nepalis are not technically unique because all humans are the same, but since they can work with more energy, they stand out against the Biharis and they get picked up
before everyone else. Nepalis are a little bit more generous too. If you ask a migrant from Nepal to help you, they usually will. Biharis are good too, but they don’t stay because they are not adjusted to this area.

Not only is the Nepali laborer’s character coveted, but their skills are as well. People from Nepal bring with them a set of versatile skills that allow them to participate in a diversity of jobs in Leh – some a bit more technical than others. Stanzin, a Ladakhi native and co-owner of the Mogol Hotel, raved about Nepali workers, stating that he hires mostly Nepalis for his business. He explained a unique position that can only be satisfied by Nepalis. Stanzin said,

In the spring, Nepalis find a lot of work here because they are very good at cutting the trees. They are skilled at climbing up the poplar trees to cut the high branches off. They climb up and then swing from one tree to another. The trees need to be trimmed like this so that they can grow taller – the taller they get, the more valuable they become! The Nepali guys are the only ones who can cut the highest branches. They’re paid 2000R per tree trim because it’s the kind of work that no one else can do. They’re the experts at climbing the trees.

Poplar trees are crucial to Ladakhi society. They are used as fire fuel, building material, and home décor, and are one of the only trees that can endure the harsh winter months in Leh.

Part of the reverence toward Nepali labor dates back to the British rule in India, when the Nepali Gurkha soldiers developed a reputation for their exceedingly dexterous military capabilities. Stanzin added, “Nepalis are very enterprising. They won’t shy away from any work. Just like in the armed regiment, the Gurkhas are rough and tough!” He also mentioned that many Nepalis come to Ladakh to work as high altitude porters at the Sea Chen Glacier, where they get paid per kilo carried. Apparently, the standard wage is set at 15 kilos, but with every kilo added, comes extra pay.

Another skill possessed by Nepali migrants, is woodcarving. Punchok, a local Ladakhi and owner of Greater Ladakh Tours and Travels, said that local carpenters are usually hired to do special woodcarving projects because they are the only ones who have the skills and experience to design traditional carvings suitable for homes and temples. He said the carvings along the windows and rooftops are expensive and the wood is delicate, so they have to be careful about who they hire. But, he added, “there are many Nepalis who have been working with local families for years now, and they have picked up the traditional trade.” Many Nepalis are now trusted in the delicate trade and woodcarving business. The capabilities of Nepali migrants are widely recognized around Ladakh, and have made it possible for them to secure labor positions that other migrants cannot.

**Fitting in With Ladakh**

Many Ladakhis believe that Nepali migrants prosper in Ladakh because they come from the hills of the Himalayas and are used to not only the climate, but also the comparable cultural traditions. Whether this is true or not, it appears that Nepali migrants feel most comfortable in Leh’s surrounding villages. Motup shared his opinion that “Leh is for Biharis, and the villages are for Nepalis.” He said that in the villages, “they get free food, clothes, tea, everything is free for them. The Sherpa people stay in the villages because they are more comfortable there and they will earn better money.” Perhaps the reverence for Nepali labor manifests itself in the overall treatment of Nepalis in the villages, but not in Leh.
Stanzin said that Sham Valley’s Saboo Village has a Nepali goba, or village head. Apparently, he is a Nepali migrant who has been here in Ladakh for 30. He said, “there are so many Nepalis in Saboo Village who are totally Ladakhi now. Some of the Nepalis there have married Ladakhis, and they participate fully in all of the traditional Ladakhi festivals, and even speak fluent Ladakhi.” The fact that there is a Nepali goba in the village is no menial news. The goba occupies a crucial position in village life, and is usually selected by a careful process of appointment. Norberg-Hodge writes that the goba is selected by rotation, “if the whole village wants to keep him on, he may hold his position for many years, but otherwise after a year or so, the job will pass on to another householder. One of the goba’s jobs is to act as adjudicator. Though arguments are unusual, from time to time some differences of opinion arise that need settling” (Norberg-Hodge, 1991, p. 49). Nepalis can’t technically own land in Ladakh, so in the case of Saboo, the goba position must have been granted to him on terms that absolved him from being a “householder.”

Saboo Village stands out as exceptionally hospitable for reasons besides its foreign-elected leadership. I encountered a family living in Saboo who unofficially adopted a young Nepali boy named Kamal who was living under cruel conditions after moving from Tuncpur Dang, Nepal to Ladakh. A kind family took him in at the age of 14. I spoke with Kamal and his Ladakhi parents at their bookshop along the main market in Leh. The father, Yerphel, told the story of his Nepali son. He said,

Five years ago, Kamal came to work for me on my house but he was so young and I took pity on him. The labor he was doing made his hands bleed. At that time he was about 14. He was very small and the labor work was too hard. There was no food or care for him. He was living near a stream in one of the nearby villages So, I said to the contractor, “please give me this boy and he will work in my bookshop instead.” He is now like my son. I have never met his parents, but I have contact with them. If I didn’t take him in his life would be so much worse. I think his life is much better now. And now he is a perfect businessman! He completely handles my shop when I’m gone. He even wants to open his own bookshop like this one in Nepal someday.

Kamal smiled bright as Yerphel told his story. He is now 19 years old and proud of where he has come. He said, “I won’t live here my whole life. I want to go back to Nepal, my own country. Maybe after two years I will return home. But for now, I am lucky to have a family in the village. I think it is better to live in the village rather than in Leh. Its better because us foreigners get treated right.” Kamal’s situation is incredibly unique. He is able to experience village hospitality, while benefiting from Leh’s economy – plus, he has an established home and Ladakhi family to return to everyday. The vast majority of Nepalis in Ladakh cannot tell the same prosperous story.

The Labor System in Leh

Ladakh’s economy operates primarily on the basis of the Indian Army and the tourist industry, so there is a substantial demand for working hands. But local Ladakhis are not available to fill such positions because they can generally procure government jobs instead. So, the migrant labor force picks up their slack, working everything from backbreaking, stone-cracking construction jobs to restaurant managing and tour guiding. On numerous occasions, individuals shared the common opinion that, the locals in Leh “need” migrant laborers to get by in their
rapidly urbanizing capital. Padma, a local Ladakhi and grade school teacher at Druk White Lotus School in Shey Village shared that, “In Leh, local people are not ready to work as laborers, masons, plumbers, or electricians...so we are very dependent on people from outside.” Without the migrant work force, it seems the town could not operate the way it does today.

The process of navigating the labor system in Leh is chaotic and corrupt. Nepali laborers often find themselves in the highly disorganized sector of manual construction, where they are given no insurance, equipment, toilet facilities, or medical coverage. Many believe the Labor Office and government in Ladakh, who are supposed to take responsibility for migrants, in fact severely neglects them. The Labor Office is supposed to regulate the jobs for incoming waves of migrants. Their task is to make sure that everyone is being treated and compensated fairly. Upon arrival, migrants are required to report to the police station and apply for a labor card. Migrants must show a letter from the Nepal government declaring their visit to India, and present an official Nepali ID card issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs Office. The neighboring countries have a unique agreement that citizens from either place can visit back and forth freely, so Nepalis headed for Leh needn’t worry about passport or visa documentation. Nepalis are required to renew their labor cards ever year and be prepared to present valid documentation to appropriate officers at any time. Official checks happen at the airport and at designated road check points. Mina Devi, a 45-year-old Nepali mother and grandmother of four, shared that, “here in Ladakh, we don’t get hassled too much about official paperwork and documentation, but at the check post in Jammu, the police give us some trouble. We usually come by road because the flights are too expensive, but they always want 300 to 400 rupees before they will let us pass.”

Devi also clarified that the preferred method of work is under contract, because employees under contract receive set salaries and regular projects. She says that the contractors are more trustworthy, and can usually find them another project “once the current one is finished. Its like, ‘where you move, I move.’” But finding contract work is often difficult since major construction is only approved when it is a government-sponsored project like BRO road construction or special projects such as the Beatification of Leh initiative happening currently. Sometimes skilled Nepalis are recruited for contracted work, but most have to find daily wage jobs upon arrival. Every morning before 8am, hundreds of laborers gather at the Leh Polo ground looking for daily work – Nepalis and Biharis alike. Provisional contractors and employers visit the Polo grounds in the morning to pick up laborers for small – and often personal – projects. A local employer referred to this type of labor as “freelance labor”.

**Labor Exploitation**

Depending on one’s skill level and experience, labor wages tend to differ. But on average, the migrant laborer should make about 350 Rupees per day. That is, for someone involved with general construction– lifting and transporting sticks, stones, and other materials. On most construction projects in Leh, there is one mason who oversees the laborers and in general, he gets paid much more than the laborers. The mason usually makes 600-700 Rupees per day and “all he has to do is just tell the laborers what to do, like lift those stones,” claims Devi who admitted,
Sometimes we are exploited. For example, sometimes a contractor will say to a laborer, ‘I’m cutting this much out of your pay because you did such and such wrong,’ but they won’t tell them what they did wrong until it is time for them to be paid. Or sometimes they’ll say things like, ‘today, there is no work for you because you are lazy or you don’t do this work well.’

Devi also mentioned the proliferation of gender discrimination within the system of labor in Leh. She said that Nepali women cannot be masons no matter what kind of experience they have. In fact, she shared a story of a friend of hers who has been working as a mason for over 20 years but has never been paid like one.

Many other Nepalis experience similar manipulation on the job. Vijay Thapa, a 35-year-old from Dang, Nepal, came by himself to Ladakh 19 years ago. He informed that often times, migrants get scammed by their contractors and don’t get paid at all, “sometimes they just decide not to pay us – we just never get the money for our work.” When I asked if he or his family ever reported such abuse, he laughed and said,

No way have we ever reported getting scammed to the police! They would never help us – they would just laugh and interrogate us about our paperwork and work permits. The police are here to protect the big shots like Obama so the employers get away with it completely. We’re foreign and the locals don’t care about us. We have to live as per their law of the land. We can’t fight scams in any way possible. So, if we get ripped off by a contractor then we just have to take loans from other Nepali people for that month’s pay.

The experiences of Thapa and Devi are by no means unique, but exploitation is not nearly as prevalent on the job as it is in the homes of Nepali migrants.

**Nepali Livelihood**

I spent my first few days in Leh entirely oblivious to the reality of the Nepali living conditions in Leh. My initial interviews took place in cafes and hotels, so my impressions were jaded, such that I had come to believe Nepali migrants worked leisurely jobs and lived comfortable lives. Since the laborers work long shifts during the day, I was not able to locate any interviews until I met a man who brought me to the home of a Nepali family on the outskirts of Leh. The following is an excerpt from my field journal:

*As we approached a long row of houses I noticed that none of them were any bigger than a small corner shop. Sid walked ahead, pushed aside a tattered orange door cloth, and knocked. We had arranged this interview in the days prior, so the family was expecting our arrival. Upon entering the single-room home, I was choked with a thick smell of gasoline. A small gas stove was positioned in the center of the room that doubled as a kitchen and a heater. We were ushered to sit down and quickly served a watery grey-colored butter tea. The walls were coated in old newspaper pages, presumably for insulation. The family was Mina Devi’s. Sid and I sat with her 23-year-old daughter and 19-year-old daughter-in-law as they coddled and nursed their newborn babies. Although we both felt a bit woozy, Sid and I carried out a difficult interview, only to realize the extreme pressures under which so many Nepali migrants live. In between insisting*
that we drink our tea, and tending to the stove, Devi spoke of how she came to live in the home where we sat. She said,

Currently, 6 families – about 30 people – live in this one home. We each occupy a space like this one. We have been in this house for about one year now. We are managing okay, but it’s hard because migrants are not respected as much as the locals by the landlords. We pay 1500 rupees per month to live here. But day-by-day the rents are increasing. For the same unit, other people pay 1000 rupees. Every 2-3 months the rent increases by 200 or more. We are migrants, so the landlord increases the rent in hopes that we might leave. Due to the high rents, almost every year we have to vacate and move to a new place. There is a lot of pressure on us to pay more. It’s especially hard for Nepali migrants here because we have no financial security and no savings. So if a Ladakhi person or family wants this home suddenly, then they will automatically be preferred over us. We’re from the outside, so we’ve accepted the poor treatment as a fact of life.

The process of living in Leh becomes even more difficult when one factors in the Scheduled Tribe clause, says Devi. Almost all native Ladakhis belong to something called Scheduled Tribes, which is a process of preference similar to Affirmative Action based on tribal reservations in Ladakh. Scheduled tribe members are the only people who can buy, sell or own land in Ladakh. Such a double standard makes it extra hard for migrants to naturalize, let alone own land. Besides the exhaustive process of being marginalized by local landlords, Nepalis in Leh face additional concerns when trying to live their lives in Leh.

Scheduled Tribe members are given a ration card that allows them government-rationed goods. For those with a ration card, the Ladakhi government shop provides kerosene, rice, sugar, and wheat flour at much lower prices than the regular market. Scheduled Tribe status not only grant discounts, it also symbolizes land ownership and citizenship. Nepali people, who are not eligible for either of these things, cannot be granted a ration card, regardless of how long they have lived in Leh. So, while Ladakhis pay 10 rupees for 1kg of rice at the government shop, migrants pay 25-30 rupees for the exact same ration elsewhere.

On a rare occasion, Nepalis are lucky enough to find connections with locals who are willing to negotiate for cheaper rations. Devi’s family happens to have such a connection. She says, “We are fortunate because we know a local woman who sells rations to Nepalis for less. Our family pays 15R for 1kg of rice because we buy from her.” This local Ladakhi woman, I later learned, has created a booming business out of trading rations, with hundreds of Nepali migrants procuring rations from her every week. So what might seem like a selfless act of beneficial corruption in favor of Nepalis is in fact an undertaking to supply her personal bank account with a cash surplus. Apparently, every year she spends 400,000-500,000 rupees on fancy jewelry – an expense that is entirely funded by her business with Nepali migrants.

I spoke with two more families of Nepali laborers – each living under strikingly similar conditions – some living with 30-40 people in one home. All three of the families shared the same ideas about housing and ration discrimination. Most have to pick up and find a new home once every year, they aren’t allowed to own land, and they must buy food at higher prices than the locals. Despite the shockingly grim reality of Nepali livelihood in Leh, and the emphasis on hospitality by local Ladakhis, the local population seemed rather oblivious to what is happening within the Nepali enclave in Leh. Padma, for example, told me she thinks that, Nepalis in Leh,
“live very well. Their conditions are definitely good enough to meet their needs.” Most Nepali migrants would disagree, as their needs are questionably being met and very rarely are they received with the respect that they deserve.

Local Prejudice

“If one Nepali does something wrong, all Nepalis will be spanked”  
- Nepali laborer in Leh

The Nepali presence is rarely appreciated beyond providing manpower to locals in Leh. In fact, Nepali migrants have been marginalized by locals and shoved to the periphery of Leh for years. Thapa shared a chilling story as we sat in his overcrowded living room surrounded by Nepali friends, family, and neighbors. He appeared to be speaking on behalf of everyone in the room when he said,

If one Nepali does something wrong, all Nepalis will be spanked. We’ll all face the backlash. For example, in Alchi Village about four years ago, a young Nepali boy was working for a lama monk, but the monk never paid him. One day, the boy found out that he was rich because he saw wads of money in the monk’s bag. The boy asked to be paid a little bit for his labor, and the monk slapped him. Shortly thereafter, the boy murdered the monk with a *kukri*, a Nepali dagger. Until the boy was found, all of the Nepali people here in Ladakh were ostracized, and beaten publicly on the street. It took 4 days for the boy to be found and during those days, we had to hide and work. Needless to say, Nepalis have a very negative image here. Not just because of the boy, though – we’ve always had a bad image. The theft and petty crime has been happening around Leh in recent years is always blamed on the Nepalis even though the crimes are committed by everyone – locals and migrants alike.

Thapa and the rest of the group elaborated further as they explained stories of the oppression and exclusion they have experienced and witnessed throughout their time in Leh. They said it’s not the work itself that makes life miserable, but the way they are forced to shape their livelihoods at the fringes of society. “No one listens to us. We’re not even considered human beings in Leh. The situations of other migrants are bad, sure, but at least they’re Indian citizens! We can’t even say that much. We are foreign and treated worse than other migrant workers. We’re not citizens, and we are definitely not treated like it,” remarked Thapa. As we spoke, I could feel the air grow tense as feelings of displacement surfaced.

Perhaps in direct relation to such discrimination, local Ladakhis share many negative opinions about migrants. Padma expressed how sometimes she feels like her hospitality is taken for granted by migrant workers because they don’t understand traditional customs like insincere refusals. In Ladakh, it is considered rude to “accept any offer too quickly; it is polite to do dzangs, that is, to refuse once or twice before accepting” (Norman, 2005, p. 4). Padma told me, The way Nepalis and Biharis behave is sometimes really not good. Sometimes they are so straightforward. Sometimes the way they talk, the way they behave is not good. These people, you know, they don’t know Ladakhi culture. Ladakhi culture is very high. Maybe it’s because of education – they are not educated. The way they act, they don’t give respect to local people. Like when we give them tea or bread, they don’t say “jule” or thank you or nothing. They think it’s their right. We still see the Ladakhi culture here in Leh – like everyone says “jule” on the road,
and its Ladakhi custom to refuse and refuse things that are offered to us, but this is something that Nepalis and Biharis don’t understand.

Another common opinion about Nepalis in Leh is that they are taking jobs away from the local population. Tsewang Dorje shared that because of the migrants, he is starting to fear for the future of Leh. Dorje said,

Ladakh already has poor people – and now they can’t get jobs. Sometimes the migrants take jobs from locals. If people keep hiring migrant labors, then someday soon there will be lots of poverty in Ladakh. But if we employ local laborers than we can fight poverty. To prevent some unfortunate circumstances in the near future, we need to hire more local labor. There needs to be a better balance of local and migrant labor. To keep Ladakh beautiful, we should employ our own people. Try to fill restaurants, hotels and even labor jobs with local people before employing migrant labor. Then, after employing locals if we still need labor, then let us bring migrant workers. If we don’t hire our own people, there will be lots of problems in the future. We would be neglecting our own people and our own peace.

Others believe that migrants are responsible for increasing rates of crime, disease, tobacco use, and a dwindling food reserve (Bodhi Sainkupar, 2008, p. 37). This blatant hostility and widespread prejudice toward migrants entirely contradicts the general conceptions of the Ladakhi population.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, one could spend an entire lifetime studying the patterns and effects of Nepal’s transnational labor migrations. As I hope this paper demonstrated, people from Nepal occupy an incredibly unique position in Leh, such that they have raised questions of belonging within the greater economy of transnational migration. Contradicting popular discourse about Ladakh, it has become excruciatingly clear that the Nepali is accepted in Leh only insofar as he or she can pick up the unwanted labor and then disappear. Migrant Nepali families and individuals in Leh exist in a borderspace between foreign and belonging; at once cherished as a labor force, and ostracized as community members.
Appendix

A relevant topic that I was unable to address in the body of this paper is the living and labor conditions of migrants who build the roads in Ladakh. Violent accidents on high mountain roads often send Nepali migrants to their deaths. It was Jonathan Demenge’s article *In the Shadow of Zanskar: The Life of a Nepali Migrant* that partially inspired this study, and must be included should the current research be expanded upon.

Figure 1 (top left) – The front side of an ID card issued in the Salien District of Nepal

Figure 2 (top right) – The backside of the same ID card issued in the Salien District of Nepal

Figure 3 (bottom left) – A photo of a labor card issued to a Nepali migrant in Leh, Ladakh
Figure 4 (top left) – A large board depicting components of the Leh Beautification Project

Figure 5 (top right) – A family of Nepali laborers turns concrete and carries bricks at a construction site in the main Leh market

Figure 6 (bottom left) – A young Nepali laborer breaks stones as companions assemble the pieces into a new walkway.

Figure 7 (bottom right) – A Nepali couple cuts wood for road maintenance along the main Leh market
Figure 8 (top left) – Nepali children at the Moravian Mission School Hostel take a break from their studies to smile for a photo

Figure 9 (top right) – Nepali children at the Moravian Mission School Hostel pose with one of four Nepali wardens

Figure 10 (bottom left) – An image depicting some of Leh’s many Poplar trees, which offer labor to migrants in the springtime

Figure 11 (bottom right) – A parade marches through Leh Town in celebration of the Buddha’s birthday
Figure 12 (top left) – A Nepali family in their home after an interview

Figure 13 (top right) – Employee living quarters behind Gesmo Restaurant, an establishment with an entirely Nepali staff

Figure 14 (bottom left) – The exterior and entrance of a migrant Nepali family’s home
**Glossary of Terms**

**BRO** – The *Border Roads Organization*, is an organization that develops and maintains arterial roads on the borders of India. The BRO is also involved in the construction of tunnels and has helped to accelerate the economic development of the north and northeastern border states of India.

**Beautification of Leh** – a 2015 government-sponsored initiative to boost the aesthetic caliber of Leh Town.

**Goba** – Ladakhi term for the head of a Ladakhi village (Norberg-Hodge, 1991, p. 49)

**Dzangs** – Ladakhi term for the tradition of insincere refusals (Norman, 2005, p. 4)
Bibliography


Suggestions for Future Research

Leh greater Ladakh, are full of untouched research topics waiting to be unraveled by SIT students. Perceptions and realities of health in Ladakh, is one such topic. I have encountered numerous healthy food initiatives throughout the community in Leh, and I noticed that many of the schools have advertised health goals for their students and staff. On the household level, I think there is also much to explore in terms of nutrition. My homestay family liked to drink a concentrated and traditional butter tea in the morning, but the evening dose is not as highly concentrated. They told me its, “for health reasons, because as you know butter is not so good for health.” That was the first time a Himalayan community member has explicitly suggested that melted butter might not be the healthiest option for everyday tea. Other potential topics include: religious affiliation and education in Ladakh (balancing education with religious tradition), the school-to-hostel system (like Moravian Mission School and Hostel), migrant education, educational initiatives in Ladakh (SECMOL is always a good choice of study).

General ISP Suggestions

I chose to come to Ladakh after weeks of indecisiveness and frustration with ISP planning. Needless to say, I decided on a location late, and had to think quickly upon arrival. In regards to lodging, I suggest that future students plan accommodations before embarking on ISP, and have a clear itinerary upon arrival. Be very concise with lodging owners as to long you intend to stay in their hotel/guesthouse as to avoid confusion or overcharge. If headed to Leh, Ladakh, be aware that there is one area in Leh that is highly concentrated with expensive hotels. Don’t be fooled! Very nearby is an area called Changspar that offers very affordable and not-so-extravagant accommodations. Lodging in Ladakh ranges from 100-20,000 Indian rupees per night. At Lhari Guesthouse (very near the Shanti Stupa, on the ring road across from the Oriental
Hotel), I found a nice family-run guesthouse and they offered to let me stay for 400 Indian rupees per night with delicious breakfasts and dinners included. Additionally, I suggest bringing or buying small gifts for interviewees. Interviews can be draining and often take unnecessary time out of people’s daily routines. Bring something small along with you to each interview as a way of saying thank you. Furthermore, I suggest knocking as much fieldwork out of the way as soon as possible, and then start writing. That way, if more information, sources, or follow-up interviews are needed, you’ve already made contacts and are still on location. Finally, if you decide to study anything to do with Nepali-speakers, or plan to conduct interviews with people from Nepal, take advantage of the optional Nepali classes at the Yantra House pre-ISP. I regret that I could not conduct interviews by myself, or properly greet and thank my interview subjects.
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A photograph of the author taking a break from research at the Lamayuru Village monastery.