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# Labour migration, capitalist accumulation and feudal reproduction: A historical analysis from the Eastern Gangetic Plains

Fraser Sugden

## Abstract

This paper engages with the long running debate on the transition from farm based livelihoods to capitalism. Tracing the historic evolution of modes of production in the peripheral Mithilanchal region the Eastern Gangetic Plains, it notes how the economic processes driving the peasantry into the labour force are not directly connected to the process of capitalist accumulation in the diverse locales where labour is employed, as one may observe under classic situations of 'accumulation by dispossession'. The entry of the peasantry into the surplus labour pool is instead linked with a complex convergence of internal changes within the feudal mode of production on an economic, cultural and political level, and its interaction with expanding capitalist markets. The paper does note however that migrant labour still generates substantial profits for capitalism with a sharing of surplus between the latter and landlord-money lenders. It argues however that the relationship between modes of production is neither functional nor coincidental, and the paper sheds light on some of the larger class alliances which have evolved in the current political-economic conjuncture.

Key words: feudalism; migration; accumulation; India; Nepal; capitalism; agriculture

## Introduction

The movement of peasants from land based livelihoods to capitalist labour markets at home or overseas is one of the most significant social transformations underway in rural parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and this is represented most prominently by large scale labour migration. Structural adjustment, enclosure of common property resources and environmental stress have precipitated this transformation. This process is often conflated with Marx's 'primitive accumulation'. However, a review of contemporary critical scholarship on the topic can easily lead one to believe that capitalism is an all-embracing force which is both dissolving older economic formations, while simultaneously driving the migration of peasants away from land to the labour reserve army. Based upon a case study from the Mithilanchal region in the Gangetic Plains of Nepal and India, this paper highlights the need to better understand to complex interface between the capitalist and pre-capitalist when analysing the movement of the peasantry into capitalist labour markets. It notes how 'feudal' agrarian formations in this labour sending region, far from being static relics, are actively reproduced (albeit in new forms), alongside capitalist accumulation in the regions which receive the labour – a process that is however, mediated by a matrix of economic, political, ecological and cultural changes.

This paper notes as has been done elsewhere (Li, 2010, Read, 2002) that there is a disconnect between the processes driving the expansion of a 'reserve army' of migrant workers and the processes of global

capitalism which profit through employing this labour. This paper however, takes the analysis a step further to firstly emphasise that migrant labour (which forms the backbone of capitalist industry in the cities of the global periphery) does not originate in a rural vacuum. It instead emerges from communities with complex histories of uneven integration into capitalist markets and a matrix of *pre-existing* modes of production, which are interacting with capitalism in increasingly complex ways and mediating the flow of migrant labour on an economic and non-economic level. Unlike past work on the 'articulation' of modes of production, what is unique in Mithilanchal is the sharing of surplus between capitalist sector and a feudal landlord-money lending class. This is reproduced at a national or regional level through a loose yet evolving convergence of class interests and alliances across the larger social formations of Nepal and India.

On an epistemological level, the paper reaffirms the continued utility of the Althusserian conceptualisation of the articulation of modes of production, to understanding complex social formations home to both capitalist and pre-capitalist formations. This includes the frameworks set out in the radical anthropology of the 70s and 80s, which have received limited interest in recent decades in spite of their methodological sophistication (see also Cross and Cliffe, 2017).

### Theorising proletarianisation and pre-capitalist modes of production

#### 'Proletarianisation' in the global periphery

In today's global periphery, the large scale movement of peasants from the land to capitalist labour markets is frequently considered in the critical geography and agrarian change literature to be intricately connected to the processes of capitalist globalization. The drive by capital to avert crises requires differentiation by 'extra-economic' means (Akram-Lodhi, 2007, Araghi, 2012a). In the contemporary periphery for example, this is characterized by the appropriation of land for capitalist investment and the privatization of common property resources, often with the support of foreign capital<sup>1</sup>, a process commonly termed 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003). The degree to which 'coercion' is necessary has been debated, and proletarianisation via market forces alone is also relevant, particularly when observing the policies of neo-liberal restructuring (Hall, 2012). Cuts in subsidies and price supports, the commodification of seeds, dependence on chemical or hydrocarbon based inputs, and export oriented production can all serve to intensify peasant differentiation (Akram-Lodhi, 2007, 2008, Araghi, 2012a, Bernstein, 2003).

Much scholarship acknowledges that contemporary proletarianisation is releasing a global 'reserve army' of migrant labour, engaged in increasingly insecure low wage employment (Bernstein, 2004, Walker, 2008, Araghi, 2003). This is functional to capital as it seeks a 'spatial fix' to avert the crisis associated with falling rates of profit (Harvey, 2001). Araghi (2012) for example, observes a de-ruralisation and emergent 'camps' of surplus labour who have migrated to cities, dispossessed of their land due to economic shocks or enclosure. Such migrants are often on casual contracts, lack access to basic workers' rights, and receive below subsistence wages, often in so called Special Economic Zones (Arnold and Pickles, 2011).

There is however, recognition that capitalist globalisation is not a 'monolithic' force (Hart, 2002). Hall (2013) for example, engages critically with the literature on accumulation by dispossession and 'land grabs', problematizing assumptions which place these as part of a linear model of capitalist development.

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<sup>1</sup> This does not only involve the creation of capitalist labour relations, but other processes involving the redistribution of assets to facilitate accumulation, including for example corporate mergers and acquisitions (Hall, 2012). However, it is the former process which is of interest to this paper.

Similarly, Li (2010), while not contesting the very real processes of dispossession underway in the global periphery, warns against assuming a functional relationship between the process of neo-liberal capitalist expansion which causes dispossession, and the processes through which the resultant 'surplus' labour is mobilised. In other words, capital does not always dispossess *specifically* to access labour, a point also echoed by Hall (2013). Examples include plantations, which displace peasants yet do not absorb this surplus labour pool as they either bring in labour from outside, or generate profit by using labour saving technologies. Also cited are the creation of Special Economic Zones which cause dispossession yet depend on non-labour intensive sectors such as information technology (Li, 2010). What instead is realized, is the release of a dispossessed and even 'pauperized' population which is surplus to the requirements of capital (Li, 2010). In a similar vein, Webber (2008b), with reference to China, points to a broader set of processes driving communities' separation from the means of production aside from the drive for capitalist accumulation. These include political or cultural-ideological processes, which are not reducible to economic logic alone.

#### Accumulation without dispossession

The disconnect discussed thus far highlights that capitalist globalisation is a selective and multifaceted process, with more than one set of class interests at play. In a similar vein, it is increasingly evident that 'accumulation by dispossession' itself is just one of many processes of capitalist class formation in the global periphery. Household units of production can be functionally articulated to supply surplus to capitalism without losing land, usually through petty commodity production (Banaji, 1977, Bernstein, 1977, De Janvry, 1981)<sup>2</sup>. Araghi (2012b) refers to this as 'partial' dispossession where surplus is appropriated by corporate capital via the sub-contractors who supply inputs at unfavourable rates. Also relevant is the concept of 'semi-proletarians' whereby peasant producers maintain enough land to 'subsidise' capitalist labour (Bernstein, 2001). This tendency was outlined by both Lenin (1960) and Kautsky (1988), and referred to in the Latin American context as 'functional dualism' (De Janvry, 1981). The presence of a non-proletarianised labour force that can periodically supply workers has been framed by Glassman (2006) as evidence that 'primitive accumulation' is not a one off event but a continuous feature of capitalism.

Hart (2002b) specifically coins the term 'accumulation without dispossession' to explain the unique pattern of capitalist accumulation in China and Taiwan whereby smallholder farming facilitates the reproduction of capitalist labour. Paudel (2016) also uses the term with reference to the community forestry sector in Nepal. Direct producers harvest forest products from community owned forests via a network of contractors and community elites, facilitating capital accumulation without the enclosure of forest lands.

This rich body of scholarship accepts that capitalism and even 'primitive accumulation' can exist without full proletarianisation of labour. What is important is not the concentration of the means of production or 'dispossession' but the subordination of producers to market imperatives of capitalism (Hall, 2012). While this scholarship goes a considerable way to deconstruct linear narratives of capitalist transition, there is often an implication that producers who are not dispossessed are, nevertheless, still an integral part of capitalism, rather than being integrated into a mode of production in its own right. Hall (2012) cautions that in order to understand primitive accumulation, it is necessary to conceptualise what is inside

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<sup>2</sup> This process is epitomized by contract farming (White, 1997)

capitalism and what is outside. Social relations may be 'outside' the sphere of capitalist *production*, even if they are situated within larger a capitalist economy.

Sanyal (2014), for example, suggests that contemporary human rights discourse and welfarist governmentality are allowing for a *reversal* of primitive accumulation, and are producing spaces which allow for the recreation of 'non-capitalist' economic formations, what he terms the 'need economy'. This is framed as an imperative of governance and the global development industry to ensure the sustenance of those who are surplus to the requirements of capitalism, while in the process, maintaining the hegemony of capital. However, the concept of reversal implies that primitive accumulation has already taken place, and thus the concept of 'pre-capitalist' modes of production lacks relevance, a position which this paper departs from.

Understanding the 'pre-capitalist': Lessons from Althusser

Some of the most nuanced analyses of non-capitalist formations have been through the Althusserian tradition, which sought to reformulate Marxian political economy to counter critiques of economism and essentialism (Resch, 1992). A key entry point for this research is the conceptualisation of the mode of production itself. To Althusser and Balibar (1968, 215), the mode of production is constituted by three functional 'elements', the means of production, the labourer, and the appropriator of surplus labour. These three elements are structured by two 'connections': the relation between the labourer and the means of production (the *forces of production*), and the property relation which defines the how surplus is appropriated and put to use (the *relations of production*) (Althusser and Balibar, 1968, 212-216).

Crucially, Althusser and Balibar note that modes of production never exist in isolation, but coexist and articulate with others at specific historical junctures. An important theoretical tool to support this is that of the "social formation," conceptualised as a matrix of 'instances' which can be economic, ideological or political and are structurally connected with varying levels of functionality or autonomy. On an economic level, there may be *several* coexisting modes of production, although one is normally 'dominant', and this can be either capitalist or pre-capitalist (Althusser and Balibar, 1968, 212-215). A social formation has been conceptualised as a structural equivalent to the sociological concept of 'society' (Tilley, 1982), although what this means in terms of spatial configurations is less clear. To Santos and Slaner (1977, 5), it is space which gives a social formation its concrete form through the localised convergence of not just economic (i.e. modes of production themselves), but political and ideological processes. As they note: "*The history of the social formation is the history of the superimposition of forms created by the succession of modes of production, of their entanglement with its 'spatial territory'*". Bettelheim (1972) argues that there is a complex hierarchy of 'national' social formations, in which capitalist or pre-capitalist systems may be dominant, although all are situated within a broader "worldwide capitalist mode of production". Social formations can also be conceptualised at a subnational level when political-ideological or economic forms are localised within a larger national social formation. They may also take the form of larger cross border cultural regions (see Frankenberg, 1978, Seddon, 1978).

The debate over social formations is of important theoretical relevance to this paper, as even if a national (or regional) social formation is dominated by capitalism, this does not mean that modes of production on the ground are 'capitalist', an assumption too often made in agrarian transition scholarship. Andre Gunder Frank for example, argued that peripheral economies such as India and Latin America were 'capitalist' since the colonial era due to their integration within (and supply of surplus to) the global economy through mercantile capitalism. However, this conceptualization has been critiqued for over-

emphasizing the relations of exchange (and merchant capital) rather than the relations of production (Hall, 1996). Such an ahistorical approach marks a departure from Marx himself, who acknowledged the importance of pre-capitalist modes of production in mediating capitalist infiltration into peripheral locales such as colonial India (Gupta, 1977, Lin, 1980)<sup>3</sup>.

However, the Althusserian tradition extends beyond simply acknowledging the presence of coexisting modes of production. The processes through which the capitalist and non-capitalist interact can be better understood through the concept of 'overdetermination' which refers to the multifarious means through which various processes in the social whole are constituted by each other (Althusser, 1969). Althusser (1969, 106) stresses that a given contradiction (e.g. between labour and capital), can be understood only by reference to its relation to the multiple forms of the superstructure within a given social formation (e.g. the state, ideology), and its embeddedness within specific local historical contexts on the one hand (e.g. local culture, patterns of class struggle, trajectories of internal economic change) and within a particular "world context" on the other (i.e. unique relations of domination and subordination between nations). To Althusser however, the superstructure is not a necessary condition of the base, but has its own essence and logic (Althusser, 1969). This has parallels with recent literature asserting how locally confined political processes of the state which are not driven directly by a logic of capital accumulation, can play a critical role in mediating the dispossession of the peasantry by capitalism (Hall, 2012, Webber, 2008a), resulting in far more complex and drawn out interactions with capitalism.

The French radical anthropologists of the 1970s and 80s represented an important body of scholarship influenced by the Althusserian tradition. Mobilising ethnographic research in Sub-Saharan Africa, they sought to understand the co-existence of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production and the associated interaction between economic, political and ideological processes (Dupré and Rey, 1979, Meillassoux, 1973, 1980). For example, Dupré and Rey, (1979) with regards to Congo-Brazzaville noted how the pre-colonial lineage mode of production purchased goods from capitalism, yet the primacy of exchange relations within the clan for symbolic rather than productive purposes meant there was little interest in accumulation. This was in fact an obstacle for capitalism in its drive to yield surplus value in the form of labour or commodities. Rey notes that only the coercive political and economic interventions of colonialism were able to subordinate such modes of production (cf. Resch, 1992).

The most important contributions of this body of scholarship was the analysis of how these older modes of production could 'resist' capitalist expansion, but could also be reconfigured so they could supply surplus to the latter. Paradoxically, these articulations – once well established – could be very profitable for capitalism. Hall (2012) and Glassman (2006) cites this as one of the reasons that state bureaucracies or capitalists may even oppose primitive accumulation. An important argument in this regards revolves around the concept of labour reproduction. Marx (2008 [1933], 36), notes that wages in capitalism cover both the cost of the maintenance of the labourer and the cost of *reproducing* the labour force. As he notes: *"In the same manner, the cost of production of simple labor-power must include the cost of propagation, by means of which the race of workers is enabled to multiply itself, and to replace worn-out*

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<sup>3</sup> Whether one gives primacy to the relations of exchange or the relations of production when characterising modes of production and their transition represents a deeper fissure in Marxist political economy. This was echoed in the debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe with Sweezy focussing his analysis on trade and exchange, while Dobb and others (e.g. Takahashi and Mins, 1952) gave primacy to the production relations on the ground.

*workers with new ones*". However, in the context of the kind of temporary migrant labour which is widespread in peripheral social formations, the wages only cover the cost of the labourer alone, offering exceptional profits to capitalist employers, a point elaborated in detail by Meillassoux (1981, 107-137) in the context of West Africa.

Meillassoux noted how during Europe's industrialization, the destruction of the peasantry culminated in a stable proletariat whose labour power was produced, maintained and reproduced *within* capitalism itself. In the case of *peripheral* economies however, this often falls to the domestic agricultural economy to compensate for lower wages, as most migrants do not make a 'break' from the land. They increasingly migrate often as individual workers without their families, and maintain strong ties to their home community, where they return periodically and on retirement. In this context, migrants (and also casual non-migrant labourers) are paid a wage which covers only their *minimum* subsistence needs. It often falls to the pre-capitalist mode of production in their place of origin, to cover the living cost of the migrant during periods spent at home, or when they are unproductive due to illness. The pre-capitalist sector also covers the longer term costs of both bringing up and educating children who often stay at home (i.e. creating the new generation of workers), and their 'retirement', including networks of social support. These are costs which in advanced capitalism may be borne by higher wages or the welfare state, a point noted by Sehgal (2005) and Breman (2009). In peripheral countries however, they are provided by the pre-capitalist sector as a 'rent' for capitalism (Meillassoux, 1981). Wolpe (1979) made a similar argument with regards to the Apartheid era black reserve whereby the kinship based units of production in the reserves met the *reproduction* needs of labour power for capitalism, with this articulation being reproduced through the political apparatus of the state and its racial ideologies.

Under neo-liberal globalization, Sehgal (2005) notes that the increased importance of temporary migration to livelihoods in the Global South, mean the dependence upon domestic and community economic and cultural systems to reproduce labour power is becoming even more important. This can be set against a broader context outlined by Nancy Fraser (2018) whereby capitalism under neoliberalism is increasingly dependent upon labour in the periphery, whereby colonialism and racialized ideology obstructed the development of class compromise and legal frameworks which in later years operated in the interests of workers in the core. This included (amongst others) covering labour reproduction costs through higher wages and welfare.

Althusser's approach to articulation has of course been developed but also critiqued, most notably the post-structuralist Marxian tradition (Gibson-Graham et al., 2001) which has sought to move beyond notions of a hierarchy of modes of production subordinate to capitalism. Instead it further develops Althusser's concept of 'overdetermination' to represent the economy as constituting a decentered totality of "multiple capitalisms" and "non-capitalist" formations (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 23). While this work deconstructs the vision of an all-powerful capitalism, it also argues that no process in the social world (economic, political or ideological) and no particular economic formation (capitalist or otherwise) can be considered more important than any other in determining a particular outcome. While the move to identify complexity in economic formations is useful, Glassman (2003) stresses the need to maintain a notion of structural power to explain phenomena such as uneven development or to identify the dominant contradiction against which political struggles can be directed. He therefore places value in recognising the casual efficacy of particular structural forces (such as particular class contradictions or processes), yet emphasises, like Althusser, that these are present in particular historical-empirical conjunctures, rather than being embedded in a priori theory (Glassman, 2003).

This argument echoes the much earlier intervention by Stuart Hall, who defends the Althusserian position in the face of post-structural critique, for its capacity to understand the unity within complexity: “...we have to characterize Althusser's advance, not in terms of his insistence on "difference" alone-the rallying cry of Derridean deconstruction-but instead in terms of the necessity of thinking unity and difference; difference in complex unity, without this becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such” (1985, 93). Hall (1996) also asserts the intrinsic value of the concept of articulation of modes of production to understand the ‘complex unity’ of social formations, including the African cases analysed by scholars such as Wolpe and Meillassoux. However, in his analysis of South Africa he usefully substitutes the Althusserian notion of ideology with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to understand the means through which the ideological and political levels of social formations interact with the economic<sup>4</sup>. Hegemony is defined as a system through which a dominant class achieves social authority, often through non-coercive means, on an economic, political and ideological level – in this case, through the prism of race.

Feudalism and articulation of modes of production in South Asia

One of the most well-known engagement with ‘non-capitalist’ economic formations in South Asia was the Mode of Production debate in the 1970s and 80s which sought to determine whether Indian agriculture capitalist (see Rudra, 1974) or ‘semi-feudal’ (see Bhaduri, 1973, 1977, Prasad, 1973). Bhaduri (1973) presented a classic model of semi-feudalism in rural Bengal whereby land poor peasants are bonded to landlords through the interlinkage of land ownership and usury. Innovations to increase yields are withheld by landlords as this will reduce the tenants’ indebtedness and undermine the power and authority of the landlords, even if the surplus they can extract is higher. In an associated argument, the concept of a ‘semi-colonial’ social formation suggests that as the capitalist sector has been distorted by imperialism, it does not have the capacity to end the rural poor’s dependence on landlords, and ‘semi-feudalism’ thus survives in rural areas (Chandra, 1974, Sau, 1975).

While these observations were important, unlike the Althusserian influenced research from Africa, they remained largely economistic in their explanations. As a consequence the concept of semi-feudalism was easily critiqued. Brass (2002) problematizes the concept over its weak conceptual definition and linear conceptualisation of history whereby semi-feudalism is defined by the presence of unfree agrarian relationships alone. They are interpreted as relics of the past, when in fact such relationships are widespread under capitalism. He also critiques the very term ‘semi-’ which suggests an ambiguity in systems which are in fact defined clearly in Marxism. Hart (1986) critiques the research on interlinked contracts, including the work of Bhaduri, given that conditions of un-freedom can appear in the context of productive reinvestment as well as apparently ‘backward’ agrarian contexts. They can be viewed instead as a means through which dominant groups exercise social control, rather than being emblematic of feudalism or a transitional stage in the development of agrarian capitalism.

While this paper would still assert the utility of concepts such as feudal or semi-feudal modes of production in South Asia, it acknowledges that much past scholarship has failed to adequately define

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<sup>4</sup> This expands upon Althusser’s notion of ideology which placed considerable emphasis on the role of the state. The concept of hegemony captures how ideology is reproduced through civil society, outside of the direct control by state apparatus (Hall, 1985).



feudal agrarian relations, or engage with the complexities of how surplus was transferred between pre-capitalist economic formations in the region, and the political, cultural and ideological processes through which articulations are reproduced. An exception was a much later study by Singh (2007), who applied the Althusserian concept of articulation to Adivasi or 'tribal' social formations in Madhya Pradesh supplying labour to capitalism, where there were some parallels with the communitarian African tribal societies discussed by Meillassoux. The study analyses the internal changes in relations of production and its relationship with feudal, and then capitalist modes of production, drawing links with the process of religious proselytization.

With regards to Nepal, Blaikie et al's (2001) study, while not mobilising the same theoretical framework, have offered a more nuanced analysis of the overall social formation, including the coexistence of capitalist and feudal modes of production, and the important role of the state and political apparatus in the context of Nepal's structural dependence on India, as well as its complex position (i.e. a periphery within a periphery) in the global capitalist system.

More recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in 'modes of production' in India, particularly in the context of the stresses brought about by neo-liberal restructuring (see edited volume, Lerche et al., 2013). While some research has continued to explore the persistence of semi-feudal modes of production (Kar, 2018), most scholarship has pointed to a decline in pre-capitalist social relations under expanding neo-liberal markets and migration (Harriss, 2013, Basu and Das, 2013, Rodgers and Rodgers, 2001). Scholars such as Patnaik (2006) have, like Bernstein (2006) moved away entirely from the traditional 'agrarian question'. It has been argued that commercialisation and market liberalisation in India have left farmers vulnerable to falling prices and exploitation by global agribusiness (Patnaik, 2006). While the renewed interest in agrarian transition in South Asia is welcome, recent work has a tendency to imply that there is a nascent capitalism in agriculture (even if it has been blocked by imperialism), and downplay the persistence of the pre-capitalist.

This paper *does not* claim that empirical research on the dissolution of older economic formations by capitalism is incorrect, either from South Asia or beyond. This transformation does apply in certain regions. The paper instead mobilises an Althusserian framework to trace a more complex process of transition in a particular geographical and temporal context – that of Mithilanchal. This is in tune with the most crucial epistemological break of the Althusserian tradition – the need to identify historical individualities of given social formations rather than attempting to fit what is observed into an evolutionary framework drawn from a priori theory<sup>5</sup>. The paper is thus strongly influenced by the French radical anthropological tradition, the utility of which has been overlooked in recent decades, in spite of its potential to shed light on the unprecedented changes in rural communities of the Global South since the 1990s (Cross and Cliffe, 2017). The approach combines ethnographic and historically grounded insight to uncover unique trajectories of economic change, without losing site of the structural processes which tie modes of production together and mediate the interaction between economic, political and cultural changes in a global context which has transformed rapidly since these early debates took root.

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<sup>5</sup> See the intervention by Bois (1978) in the debate with Brenner over the divergent paths of French and English feudalism.

## Methods

This research was focused on two districts in 'Mithilanchal', a densely populated region which spans the Nepal-India border, encompassing Northeast Bihar and parts of the Eastern Nepal Tarai-Madhesh. While the research is split across two districts (Dhanusha and Madhubani) on adjacent sides of the border, the region shares a common language and culture, and remarkable similarities in social structure and historical agrarian relations – making a two country study particularly valuable. The region is one of the most peripheral within both Nepal and Bihar respectively and thus an analyses into the root causes of persisting poverty in this belt are all the more valuable.

The research involved in depth analysis of secondary sources including Nepal government and colonial sources, combined with data from multiple projects following 5 years of research in Mithilanchal. Statistical data was drawn from three large surveys on agriculture and livelihoods across ten villages (see Figure 1). The first random survey of was carried out in 2013 in Rakuwari and Bhupatti of Bihar's Madhubani district, Thadi Jijha and Ekrahi of Nepal's Dhanusha district (see Table 1). The second random survey was completed in 2014 in Ragunathpur and Giddha of Dhanusha, Korahiya and Nanour of Madhubani. The third is a census survey compiled from two villages in Madhubani, Bhagwatipur and Mahuyahi in 2015, which collected data on all households in the community. All three surveys were supplemented with qualitative interviews and focus groups (see Table 1), which included the collection of oral histories on agrarian relations. The largest data set is from 86 in depth interviews with women farmers carried out in Rakuwari of Madhubani and Thadi Jijha of Dhanusha in 2014, covering topics relating to the impact of out-migration on farm management, and the use of remittances, and including both focussed quantitative data and qualitative data<sup>6</sup>.

## Case study

The historical origins of feudal agrarian relations in Mithilanchal: 1600s – 1950s

Mithilanchal has a long history as a region, being once part of the ancient kingdom of Mithila, historically associated with the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* (Burghart, 1978). Subsequent recorded histories points to an expansion and contraction of successive centralized kingdoms over the centuries centered on this northeastern corner of the Gangetic Plains. In some respects, Mithilanchal itself could be considered a 'social formation' in its own right in the Althusserian sense. However, its division into two halves corresponding with the present day Nepal-India border under the Karnata dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Chaudhury, 1964) and the important role played by the state in shaping the trajectory of change, points to the need for a more complex conceptualisation. This is because the region was from then onwards was gradually integrated into the two larger 'national' (albeit closely interacting) social formations of Nepal and India.

Darbhangha on the Indian side, was subordinated to the Mughals in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hindu rajas and chieftains continued to retain economic and political privileges on payment of tribute, the most notable of which was the Darbhanga Raj an upper caste Hindu family appointed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to maintain law and order and collect revenue (Chaudhury, 1964). The Nepal side of the border was known to have been reforested following the collapse of ancient Mithila, and aside from some small Hindu and tribal

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were introduced to the team by the gatekeepers and invited to participate, although further participants were engaged through a 'snowballing' technique, whereby initial households we interviewed would in turn introduce us to other potential respondents.

chieftaincies, the Dhanusha region was only extensively resettled from the 17th century with the emergence of early state formations such as the Sen Kingdom (Burghart, 1978). This was followed by the Gorkhali dynasty, the founders of the present day Nepali state in the late 18th century, the expansion of which culminated in the clearing of the forest frontier (Gaige, 1976, Sugden, 2013).

At the dawn of the colonial era, the mode of production on both sides of the border could be considered 'feudal' in character. In order to understand what one means by 'feudal', it is necessary to move beyond simplistic definitions such as the presence of serfdom or forced labour, and identify a broader characterisation rooted in the mechanisms of exploitation, the property relationship and the form of labour power (see Takahashi and Mins, 1952). The features of feudalism as alluded to by Marx (1932) when discussing the European context, include firstly, control over the means of production by a small land owning class with economic, as well as political-ideological power over a peasant majority. A second attribute includes the appropriation of surplus (often in kind) through extra-economic means, backed up by the political power of landlords - 'surplus' may take the form of labour tax or ground rent. R S Sharma's (1985) definition of 'Indian feudalism', refers to a similar agrarian system whereby the peasantry is subjugated to overlords who use extra-economic power to maintain control over land and appropriate surplus, either through rent, labour service or centralised taxation. A third characteristic which is often overlooked is the use of surplus for *consumption* rather than productive reinvestment. Marx asserts that the feudal lord consumes the product of the land rather than investing it as capital to maximise productivity. Even if the surplus is sold, generating 'value', it is used for "luxury consumption", as Marx notes in *Grundrisse* (1973, 469).

On the Indian side of the border in Madhubani, the revenue generation hierarchy of pre-Mughal Hindu state formations and a rigid caste structure, suggests that concentration of land amongst a landlord class was already present prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Chaudhury, 1964). However, this was likely to have been solidified under the Mughals and Darbhanga Raj. As in other parts of the Mughal empire, politically powerful land owners, extracted a portion of the crop from the peasants to channel to the state as tax, retaining a portion for themselves for diversion into luxury consumption, while also extracting surplus as rent from tenants on their private holdings (Chaudhury, 1964). There was continuity in social relations when the region fell into British hands in 1765, as the colonialists preserved the administrative power of landed intermediaries to maximize revenue generation and solidify political control. The most powerful intermediaries were given the title of *zamindar*, and with the support of a network of lower level administrators, were given the right to collect tax and look after land administration. This included the descendants of the Darbhanga ruling family and their local level intermediaries who became the largest zamindars, with their estates estimated to be up to 4000 square miles as of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and a large network of intermediaries (Rorabacher, 2016). The *zamindars* and their administrators, took advantage of their political privileges to maximize the exploitation of the peasantry through rent, usury and bonded labour (Jha, 2003, Ram, 1997). The flow of tax to the colonial regime meanwhile represented an early articulation with capitalism whereby surplus would be shared between the feudal landlords and the British colonial state.

On the Nepal side of the border, the centralized bureaucracies of the Sen and Gorkhali kingdoms set up a tax collection system based on the Mughal model, and encouraged migration from India to populate the

forest frontier (Regmi, 1978, Yadav, 1984). Along with a similar caste composition and culture, the mode of production in both regions was arguably quite similar in the early colonial period, with the exception of a few yet to be subjugated mostly Adivasi regions on what was left of the Nepal Tarai forests to the north and east (see Sugden, 2013).

At the base of the agrarian structure in both regions was a large class of middle and low caste labourers, tenants and marginal owner cultivators. At its apex was a politically powerful class of usually high caste<sup>7</sup> landlords and intermediaries who extracted surplus through rent, interest on loans and tax, with the latter being channelled to the bureaucracy, the Kathmandu nobility and the army (Regmi, 1976, Chaudhury, 1964). Official records from 19<sup>th</sup> century Dhanusha (Regmi, 1982c), and Madhubani (Chaudhury, 1964) suggest that local intermediaries took advantage of administrative weaknesses to extract additional levies from the peasants for personal consumption, including unpaid corvée labour obligations or *begari* (Regmi, 1982).

Inequality was intensified in Nepal under the Rana regime, who installed a more efficient tax generation apparatus to maximise the diversion of agrarian revenue to Kathmandu to fund the increasingly conspicuous consumption of the ruling class. They also distributed tax free 'land grants' across the Tarai-Madhesh to upper castes from the hills who were close to state power (Regmi, 1976). The latter emerged into some of the largest landlords in the Dhanusha region, alongside the lowland upper and middle castes. Oral histories in the study sites reported that the surplus appropriated by local landlords through rent and usury was, like their counterparts in the capital, invested in an extravagant lifestyle. Landlords in Dhanusha kept elephants as status symbols and for transport. While Regmi (1976) coined the term 'state landlordism' to describe the Rana era mode of production, it has most of the same hallmarks of 'Indian' feudalism described by Sharma (1992) above. Local level landlords would still corner a significant share of the surplus, yet unlike on the Indian side of the border where tax was now paid to the colonial state, a share of surplus went to a centralised feudal nobility, like in the Mughal Empire.

Throughout Mithilanchal, a lack of off farm labour opportunities, combined with population pressure and poor harvests within the existing feudal agrarian structure meant the emergence of a surplus labour pool was present even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. Colonial era labour migration had been reportedly in some parts of the Eastern Gangetic Plains such as West Bihar (De-Haan, 2010) and some parts of the state were sources of recruitment of indentured labour for other parts of the empire (Brass, 1999). There may have been some movement from Mithilanchal, although the Gazetteer for Darbhanga district (which includes Madhubani), with reference to the 1920s, suggests otherwise<sup>9</sup>:

*"Agricultural base has not been compensated by the industries and minerals and the burden of dependents on self-supporting persons have terribly increased. Absorptive capacity in agriculture is limited and with diminished opportunities for migration, 'unemployment' and under-employment have considerably increased.*

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<sup>7</sup> Although in Nepal it was common for middle castes or chieftains from tribal (*adivasi*) communities to also take up administrative rule if they had local political power.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in Darbhanga, the district which includes present day Madhubani, the population rose from 2,630,496, in 1801 to 4,413,027 in 1961 (Chaudhury, 1964, 41).

<sup>9</sup> What migration was present, particularly in West Bihar, was often not marked by an articulation of pre-capitalist and capitalist systems, but a complete break from the local feudal economy of the village as in the indentured labourers who migrated to other parts of the British empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*As much as 38 per cent of the total population constitutes the mass of cultivating labourer who are landless and a major portion of this class is redundant to the requirement of rural economy. Further the seasonal character of activity in agriculture makes the situation worse in off seasons and with little opportunities avoidable elsewhere they remain economically inactive for a greater-part of the year” (Chaudhury, 1964, 294).*

A similar surplus labour pool is likely to have been present over the border in Dhanusha, which was even more distant from market centres and sources of employment. The comprador Rana rulers built an alliance with the British to protect Nepal’s territorial sovereignty, while the colonialists were given access to Nepal’s raw materials as well as to its captive market for European manufactured goods, with taxes on trade enriching the Kathmandu ruling elite (Blaikie et al., 2001). This impeded the development of domestic industry, and farmers in the lowlands had few alternative livelihood options, reinforcing ties of dependence with the landed classes. ‘Migration’ was reported in government directives from as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather than being labour migration, this appeared to emerge from pauperized peasants ‘fleeing’ to find new lands in India to escape the unending exploitation from Rana era landlords (Regmi, 1982).

The significance of land tax as a form of surplus appropriation had declined at the end of the colonial era in both Nepal (Regmi, 1976) and India (Habib, 2002) as it lost its value<sup>10</sup> and the taxation on trade provided new sources of revenue for the state<sup>11</sup>. The primary surplus appropriators on the ground were now the landlords, who continued to exploit the peasantry through rent. These included the zamindars themselves with extensive personal holdings, as well as their intermediaries. While those with their own land effectively became independent peasants on these plots, they were not free from feudal exploitation. Many simultaneously rented land and they continued to labour for landlords (being paid in kind), with many still dependent upon high interest loans. Peasant farming by owner cultivators therefore, even if one was to consider it a ‘separate’ mode of production, was likely subordinate to a feudal mode of production which was dominant at a local level.

There was also limited change in the land ownership structure. During the 1950s for example, 77 percent of the total agricultural holdings in Darbhanga (including Madhubani) were reported to be below 2 acres with only 8 per cent of the holdings above 5 acres. Only 40 per cent of the population owned land (Chaudhury, 1964). There was added pressure on a fragile agrarian economy due to population increases. This was paralleled by price rises, an increase in cash needs to pay for the consumables which were now available in gradually expanding markets, and the rising costs of cultural expenditures such as marriages (Chaudhury, 1964). As the last of North Bihar and Nepal’s lowland jungles were protected or cleared by the 1960s, the cultivable area had reached the limits of expansion (Gauge, 1976, Chaudhury, 1964), meaning the forest frontier was no longer an outlet to counter land scarcity.

In the 1950s and 60s, both Bihar and Nepal saw land reforms and an abolition of the now redundant agrarian tax collection hierarchy. Interventions such as the 1950 Bihar Land Reforms act and the 1964

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<sup>10</sup> On the estates of the Darbhanga Raj for example in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revenue paid to the colonial regime was just 10%, with 15 – 20% being used for administration of the land, with the remainder for the ruling zamindars (Rorabacher, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> This includes for example, the taxation on imports and exports in Nepal in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Blaikie et al, 2001).

Nepal Land Related Act respectively, culminated in directives to abolish the colonial and Rana era tax administration system, the regulate rents and impose ceilings on landholdings to allow for the redistribution of surplus land (Adhikari, 2006, Regmi, 1976, Rorabacher, 2016). While there was some redistribution of holdings, the reforms failed to create real transformations in agrarian relations. In Nepal for example, only 3% of the cultivable area was estimated to have been redistributed as of 1972 (Regmi, 1976). In both Bihar and Nepal, landlords were integrated into the state agencies implementing reforms and there was limited political commitment to change (Kishore, 2004, Sugden and Gurung, 2012b, Joshi and Mason, 2007, Rorabacher, 2016). Oral histories in the study communities note how landlords were easily able to avoid reforms and keep their estates using political connections, division amongst family members or deception. In Bihar, Rorabacher (2016) notes how the reforms primarily impacted larger zamindars such as the families associated with the Darbhanga Raj, and even then, the administrators of the larger zamindars retained considerable wealth, along with political and economic power at a village level.

Early wage labour, industrial stagnation and persistence of feudal agrarian relations:

1960s – 1970s

The persistence of the feudal mode of production (with landlords as the main exploiting class) and population pressure was putting severe pressure on the fragile agrarian livelihoods of the marginal and tenant farmer majority by the 1950s and 60s. As argued extensively elsewhere through the conceptualisation of the 'semi-colony', the post-independence economy of India was characterised by an industrial sector lacking forward and backward linkages which was dependent on foreign capital for capital goods and technical resources (Ghosh, 1983a, Lin, 1980). This blocked the organic development of capitalist industry (Alavi, 1990, Ghosh, 1983b). Even within this 'distorted' industrial sector, economic activity converged in larger cities mostly in western India, far from the rural heartlands of the Gangetic plains. According to 1951 census of Darbhanga district (which includes today's Madhubani), local industry supported only 2 per cent of the total population and only 4% of the population were engaged in 'non-agricultural' employment, which likely includes some migrant labour. The few local factories were low value agro-processing and textile industries, and labour was often seasonal. The bureaucracy and private sector was dominated by upper castes in what was already one of India's most peripheral states, and opportunities for upward mobility amongst mostly lower caste marginal and tenant farmers were limited (Rorabacher, 2016).

Off farm employment was similarly dismal on the Nepal side of the border. Across Nepal, 'capitalist' activity was restricted to importing and distributing foreign goods, agricultural processing, and services (Blaikie et al., 2001)<sup>12</sup>. Even for the few industries, the ability to compete with imported goods was limited. Aside from a government run cigarette factory in Janakpur, there were no major industrial employers in Dhanusha, with Nepal's modest industrial activity restricted to a few small pockets in larger Tarai towns (Regmi, 1977). Most off farm labour involved construction work or menial work in government offices (Blaikie et al., 2001). At the same time, the ethno-nationalist and monarchist Panchayat system between the 1960s and early 1990s consolidated the balance of economic and political power with Kathmandu and the Nepali speaking upper castes who dominated the bureaucracy (Gaige, 1970). The southern parts of

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<sup>12</sup> Unequal trade treaties signed with British India in 1923 and again to an independent India in 1950 gave an unrestricted market to Indian and foreign made goods in Nepal, resulting in a growing trade deficit in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Blaikie et al., 2001)

the Tarai-Madhesh bordering Bihar where much of the population resided was further marginalised by the construction of an East-West highway which bypassed border cities such as Janakpur and the old trade routes. It shifted the gravity of lowland economic activity away from the Maithili heartland to a new development corridor along the foot of the hills to the north where Nepali speaking hill migrants were encouraged to settle (Rankin et al., 2017). The marginal and tenant farmers of Dhanusha were thus doubly excluded from the national mainstream on account of their ethnicity and the peripheralisation of their homeland, as well as the fact that most were from lower castes within their own Maithili speaking community. Many struggled to access citizenship papers and state services, while a Nepali language curriculum placed a constraint on the educational attainment of the younger generation (Gaije, 1970).

Across Mithilanchal, the limited growth of industry, dearth of off farm employment or opportunities for upward mobility, combined with persisting inequalities, is likely to have increased the pressure for labour migration. While there is limited data from the region a survey from Madhubani, Purnea and Gopalganj districts notes that as of 1982/3, 27.69% of households had family members who had migrated (Karan, 2003). One may have expected this to be higher, yet oral histories that were collected as part of this study in the case study communities suggested that feudal relations of production, including debt bondage to landlords, and ideological ties between land owners and tenants also played a role in restricting migration. For example, in Ekrahi of Dhanusha, elder respondents recalled the 1960s and 70s when several upper caste landlords held private holdings of up to 60 bighas (40ha). A *jajamani* (ritualized exchange between castes) system was in place, whereby tenants or labourers would work for free for these landlords, only to receive grains as payment during festivals. Poverty was extreme, and it was recalled how many households did not even have a fire to cook or utensils. If one wanted to go to Janakpur for some official work they had to borrow formal clothes from land owners. Similar stories were recalled in Rakuwari, Bhagwatipur and Korahiya of Madhubani. Elders recalled how several decades ago the marginal and tenant farmers were in perpetual debt to zamindars, often taking loans of grain, then repaying them at harvest with 1.5 times the borrowed amount plus an unpaid labour contribution.

In this context, ideological and debt bondage reportedly restricted migration. Not only were these marginal and tenant farmers bound to work directly for landlords to repay consumption loans, they did not have cash to pay for the train fare and other associated migration costs. Oral histories also noted that with low levels of education, they had limited awareness of opportunities outside, and rarely even considered migration as an avenue to escape debt bondage.

### Expanding markets, agrarian stress, and internal feudal transformation

The rise of labour migration from the 1980s – 2000s

Around the late 1980s and 2000s articulations to the capitalist sector through labour migration increased significantly in Mithilanchal. For Madhubani, this was initially to the Punjab to work on commercial farms, and later to work in the expanding capitalist sector in cities following economic liberalisation. The study from Madhubani, Purnea and Gopalganj districts by Karan (2003) notes that the proportion of households with migrants increased from 27.69% to 48.63% between 1982/3 and 1999/2000.

Similar increases in migration are evident in Dhanusha, although the location of migration and type of work is different, pointing to the role of the state in mediating the type of engagement in the capitalist labour market. As of the 1981 census, there were 402,977 Nepalese household members classed as 'absentee'. This had increased more than fourfold to 1,921,494 by the 2011 census. In 1980, 93.1% of migration was to India (Khatiwada, 2014), following a similar migration pathway as farmers in Madhubani,

although from the 1990s onwards there was a shift in the pattern of migration towards overseas destinations such as the Gulf and Malaysia. By 2011, 90.1% of migration was to overseas destinations and just below 10% was to India (Khatiwada, 2014). As of the 2011 census 26.3% of households in the Eastern Tarai-Madhesh have an 'absentee' member either in India or overseas.

The data from the study sites suggests far higher levels of labour migration than regional or national datasets. The 2013 survey (see Figure 2) notes how between 60% and 80% of households in Dhanusha and Madhubani have labour migrants and it has become a core component of household livelihoods. Many families have more than one migrant. To some extent migration takes place within all land ownership groups, although those from wealthier groups are more likely to engage in higher skilled work.

In Madhubani, all migration was to Indian urban centres, although migration to the Gulf is not unheard of in other villages. Although many are working in factories, labour is mostly casual, low paid and unskilled, being dominated by work in low value sectors such as agro-processing. Others work on an even more casual basis in ancillary sectors of the urban capitalist economy such as construction or the service industry (e.g. as cleaners, cooks or drivers). The most menial seasonal migrant labour is the domain of landless households.

Labour contract migration overseas to the Gulf and Malaysia is by far the most prominent in Dhanusha today, accounting for 94% of the migrants. This emerged from the 1990s as government policy in Nepal actively facilitated migration to overseas destinations (Graner and Gurung, 2003) as it sought an outlet to avert social unrest in a stagnant industrial sector<sup>13</sup>. The economies of the Gulf, which absorbs the majority of overseas migrants from Dhanusha, differ from traditional sectors of capitalist production, being petroleum based, and migrants take on menial jobs in the oil, service and construction sector. The profits from low wage migrants enrich the multinational companies engaged in these sectors, while also benefiting the states themselves who extract vast rents from oil (Chalcraft, 2010, Hanieh, 2010)<sup>14</sup>.

A deeper understanding post-1980s labour migration: Changes to the forces and relations of production

*Ecological stress, monetisation and migration*

To better understand the processes mediating the engagement of the Mithilanchal peasantry in migrant labour, it is useful to review the changes within the feudal mode of production itself. Firstly, with regards to the 'forces of production', ecological and meteorological stress have affected yields and cropping patterns. There is a perception that the climate has become more unpredictable as shown elsewhere (Sugden et al., 2014). Changes farmers have observed include an increase in extended dry spells and late monsoons, more frequent extreme precipitation events such as floods, greater winter chilling and increased summer temperatures. This has been acknowledged in the meteorological records from the region (Practical Action, 2009, Sharma, 2009). Production costs have increased as farmers seek to offset

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<sup>13</sup> At the same time, there was an increase in demand for labour from Gulf governments in the neo-liberal context of the early 90s and the aftermath of the Gulf war. They sought a cheap workforce on short term contracts who were culturally separated from citizens and non-aligned to the political fissures of the Arab World which threatened the ruling elites (Chalcraft, 2010, Hanieh, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Maintaining a continued flow of low wage labourers, divided by nationality, ensure that the rents from oil for the tiny population of citizens, do not need to be shared (Chalcraft, 2010, Hanieh, 2010). At the same time, the continued stability and perpetuation of these regimes which benefit from super-exploitation of migrants benefits the global capitalist core, who are ensured a continued supply of oil and profits from multinational corporations.



the risk of drought through investment in groundwater irrigation, and some have even stopped cultivating certain dry season crops. The demand for cash to manage increased production costs and the need to purchase food to manage shortfalls has increased the need for an alternative income amongst land poor and tenant farmers (Sugden et al., 2014). Figure 3 documents the coded qualitative responses during the 2014 interviews, when respondents were asked to explain their family members' migration decision making. Out of the 86 respondents, drought was raised by ten, and the need to cover agricultural input costs was raised by eleven.

However, perhaps more significant than biophysical changes in encouraging the migration of workers are changes brought about by the expansion of capitalist markets, driving monetisation *within* the feudal mode of production. Of particular importance is the rising demand for cash, a process which has been long shown to drive out-migration and the creation of a labour force. Meillassoux (1981) and Rey (cf. Resch, 1992) for example, noted how colonialism had the capacity to 'break' the autonomy of the older economic formation and drive peasants in the labour force, by creating a demand for commodities, establishing infrastructure, and promoting commercial production, while forcefully establishing taxes so households required cash. Singh (2007) applied a similar model to understanding how *adivasi* communities in India begin to supply labour to the external economy. With regards to Mithilanchal, the situation is somewhat different given that it is not a major cash crop producing region and colonial era taxation took place via landlords. Circulation of cash amongst marginal and tenant farmers was relatively limited until the 1980s, with consumption loans and wages being given in grain. However, economic liberalisation and the expansion of markets since the late 1980s has accelerated the demand for cash, intensifying some of the engagements with capitalist labour markets which occurred in other regions during the colonial era.

Firstly, not only were farmers depending more on agricultural inputs to increase yields in the context of a rising population and climate stress, the actual costs of these inputs (alongside consumables) have increased exponentially over the last two decades. For example, on the Nepal side of the border, the price for diesel increased by 352% between 1995/96 and 2009/10, both impacting the price of diesel pumping, fertiliser as well as the price of food and other basic commodities (Pant, 2011). Secondly, the expansion of markets for imported manufactured goods (aided by improved infrastructure and neoliberal restructuring) and mass media have driven an emergent culture of consumerism. Farmers reported that they increasingly prefer to purchase plastic utensils and household goods rather than depending on what is produced in traditional cottage industries and through the *jajmani* system. An earlier study from Dhanusha and Madhubani also pointed to a huge increase in the costs of dowry, weddings and cultural events (Sugden et al., 2014), a trend which is widespread across the region (Rankin, 2004, Rao, 2001). Added to this is the privatisation of education and healthcare, and the associated increase in expenditure.

Interviews and focus groups invariably noted that in the context of rising expenditure, marginal farmers and landless households, once partially dependent on locally available labour for cash, are no longer able to subsist on previous wage rates and levels of employment, driving them to enter the migrant labour force. Figure 3 shows that high or increasing household expenditure is perceived as even more important than agricultural input costs in contributing to the decision to migrate in the 2014 interviews, and was raised by 23 respondents, with dowry or wedding expenses being raised by nine. Figure 4 highlights how basic expenditure on food, education and healthcare consumes a significant proportion of migrant remittances.

Perpetual indebtedness remains an important phenomenon in this changed economic context, as also observed in an India wide review by Kar (2018) with reference to the changes brought about by economic liberalisation. The drive to migrate was often linked to the need to repay past loans (see Figure 3). 48% of all households from the 2014 interviews who are landless or own less than 0.5ha cite loan repayment when asked about the decision to migrate, often to pay off consumption loans, as well as debts incurred for house construction or marriage. When one looks at the estimated use of remittances by households over the last year in Figure 4, what is striking is that debt servicing is by far the highest expenditure for most farmers, and in Dhanusha it is double what is spent on food. This is because farmers need to take additional loans to facilitate migration in the first place given the predominance of overseas migration in Dhanusha, which incurs significant payments to middlemen. All but two households interviewed in Dhanusha had taken loans to meet migration costs. The loans taken for migration are normally around Rs150,000 (\$1500), and migrants would spend the first few years of their employment paying it off, trapping households in perpetual cycles of debt. While some farmers invested remittances 'productively' in agricultural inputs, only for those with more than 2ha did it exceed what was spent on food and debt servicing, and even then it represents just 16% of expenditure on average.

The interconnected processes of agrarian stress, rising living costs, consumerism and debt were contributing to a larger cultural shift whereby youth's aspirations were outside agriculture. The expansion of telecommunications such as social media, TV and radio has not only created a desire for 'modern' lifestyles and consumerism, as noted above, but has generated a strong aspirations amongst youth to leave agriculture and experience a particular vision of modernity, even if the lived realities of labour in urban centres or overseas diverge from perceptions prior to departure. When better off migrants bring back consumer goods during visits, this serves to further bolster the demand for others to follow suit. This shows that the decision to migrate is not be driven by simplistic economic drivers alone, as argued elsewhere (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003, Shah, 2006). Nevertheless, these changes on a cultural level still take place within the larger political-economic context of expanding capitalist markets into a feudal economy under stress. The analysis of the internal shifts within the mode of production below, also point to the complex intersection between economic, political and cultural processes which mediate the outflow of migrant labour.

#### *Reduced economic and political authority of landlords alongside persisting inequality*

An important recent change which can shed further light on the rise in labour migration is a decline in the authority of the traditional landlord in some locales, in spite of persisting economic inequalities, a trend observed elsewhere the region (see for example review by Harris, 2013). Testimonies by farmers suggested that the new economic opportunities available to the younger generation of the landed elite in urban centres mean that the pressure to hold onto land has dropped. This was most common in Dhanusha, where sales of land were encouraged by political unrest and tenant struggles, and fear of land reforms after Nepal's now stalled Maoist movement. The contraction of economic activity in the Mithila belt of the Tarai-Madhesh has also discouraged landlords from holding onto land for speculative purposes, as shown in other parts of the lowlands (Sugden, 2013). Added to this is the fragmentation of estates due to population growth and division amongst sons. The amount of land being controlled by single households is therefore declining. Table 2 shows a significant drop in the percentage of land being owned by households with more than 3ha between the 1981 and 2011 in Dhanusha, and Table 3 displays a similar drop in the case of the whole of Bihar between 1971 and 2003.

It is worth noting though that while landlords estates are smaller than in the past, many still retain considerable holdings. Table 3 shows that despite a fourfold decline in the percentage of the largest farmers with <2ha between 1971 and 2003 across Bihar state, there has been just a 1.7 times drop in the proportion of land owned by this group. This divergence suggests there is still considerable concentration of land. Oral testimonies collected from the research site also suggest that it was mostly larger farmers who benefitted from sales by landlords, and a primary difference today is that at the apex of the agrarian structure there are both large farmers and the traditional landlords. Some large farmers are middle castes such as the Yadav and Kushuwaha, who have bought land of the larger landlords who are selling off their estates. In other cases these large farmers themselves descend from landlord families who have divided land amongst sons. There is limited evidence that the base of the agrarian structure composed of marginal land owners or landless households is shrinking. In fact, between 1971 and 2003 the Bihar data shows the percentage farmers with less than 1ha actually rose. Similarly, in Nepal, Table 2 shows that there has been only marginal change in the proportion of households owning less than 0.5ha of land since the 1980s, and The Nepal Living Standards Measurement Survey data from the East and Central Tarai-Madhesh (see Figure 5) shows that between 1995/6 and 2010/11, landlessness and the proportion of pure-tenants has increased.

Table 4, which combines the three surveys which contributed to this study, offers an insight into these trends and the overall agrarian structure today in the study sites of Madhubani and Dhanusha. What is clear is that there is variation across the villages. In Bhagwatipur of Madhubani for example, only seven households (4%) own more than 2ha, with some landlords owning over 18ha. This small group owns more than half of the land. In nearby Bhupatti, the 8% with more than 2ha of land own a staggering 70% of the land, with single holdings as big as 16ha. By contrast, in some of the surveyed communities such as Nanaur of Madhubani and Giddha of Dhanusha landlords have relatively less economic power, with the largest land owners owning just 19% and 12% of land respectively. The recent changes which have reduced landlord authority have taken place unevenly across the region due to the complex history and caste composition of each community, including past class struggles.

Looking at the larger picture of all 10 villages though, it is clear that landlords and large farmers still retain considerable control over the means of production, even if ownership is more dispersed than the past. On average, the land owners with more than 2ha own more than a third of the land in spite of being just 6% of the sample. When one includes the land owned by absentee landlords who had recently moved to urban centres, and thus were not included in any of the samples, concentration of land is likely to be significantly higher.

Furthermore, regardless of changes in the landlord class, the base of the agrarian structure remains dominated by landless (31% on average) and very marginal producers (38% on average), with the vast majority being from lower and middle castes. This is even higher in the communities where larger landlords are more economically dominant, such as Bhagwatipur and Bhupatti, where 80% and 76% of the sample respectively are landless or own less than 0.5ha. The latter group who own <0.5ha of land are relatively better off, although holdings are by no means sufficient for households to even come close to meeting food needs, and most are therefore also dependent on landed classes and are subject to a range of different types of surplus appropriation (see Table 4).

Surplus appropriation by landlords and larger farmers takes place primarily through sharecropping, whereby the landlords extract half the produce in-kind as rent, and farmers also have to cover all the input

costs themselves. The dominance of this form of surplus appropriation however, varies by village, even within the communities with the highest concentration of land. In Bhagwatipur, 86% of landless households and 60% owning <0.5ha take land on lease and 66% of the land is under tenancy, while in Bhupatti tenancy is slightly lower (40% of the land), with surplus being appropriated through direct labour for landlords as well as rent. Farm wages for labourers are low, and vary from \$0.75 to \$1.5 per day for the most menial transplantation and harvest work (as of 2015), while many are paid in kind, usually 5-6 kilos of paddy per day or a share of the harvested crop, although cash wages were becoming more common at the time of writing.

The landed classes also mobilise alternative mechanisms through which to appropriate surplus – most notably of which is usury, a phenomena which has risen in recent years alongside rising indebtedness and economic insecurity. According to the 2015 census survey, landless households in Bhagwatipur and Mahuyahi for example, had an average debt of \$408 and those owning less than 0.5ha owed \$501. Interest rates are extortionate. While two thirds reported interest rates of 36% per year, a quarter were being charged 60% with the remainder being charged 48%. In Dhanusha, indebtedness was even higher due to loans to fund overseas migration. The 2013 survey showed that landless households owe on average \$1071 and those with less than 0.5ha owing \$793.

New sources of surplus for large farmers and landlords included renting out agricultural equipment such as pumpsets, which were becoming increasingly important to prevent crop failure at a time of climatic stress. Out of the 82 pump sets counted across both regions in the 2013 and 2014 surveys, only 12% belonged to the households with less than 0.5ha, and landless farmers own none. Landlords would charge an hourly rate far beyond the cost of diesel and pump maintenance (see Sugden, 2014).

While the relations of production appear to have changed relatively little over the last two to three decades and there is still a powerful surplus appropriating landed class, the more dispersed ownership of land within this class alongside changes on a political and cultural-ideological level, means that dependence of land poor households on single landlords has declined. For example, with regards to usury, respondents in one village of Madhubani noted that in the past they would generally depend on their own landlords for loans, while today there were four lenders to choose from for large loans of more than \$1000, and around twenty households who could give smaller loans of \$200 or less. This is linked to the fact that the apex of the agrarian structure includes more large farmers as well as traditional landlords, not to mention the expansion of markets and the greater circulation of cash, which gives alternative opportunities for better off farmers to accumulate wealth. The interlinkage of landlordism, labour and money lending as described in Bhaduri's (1973) seminal paper on semi-feudalism, is less common today, although forms of *corvée* labour where tenants do unpaid 'obligatory' work for landlords persist in some villages on the Nepal side of the border (Sugden, 2016). The *jajmani* system of trade between castes has also broken down with the expansion of capitalist commodity markets. Contracts, although still exploitative, have become more impersonal, with perhaps fewer of the ideological patron-client relationships to back them up. Farmers also reported in interviews that they are relatively more aware of their rights particularly after the Maoist movement in Nepal, and under Bihar's populist OBC<sup>15</sup> politics since the 1990s.

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<sup>15</sup> OBC refers to 'other backward castes' according to the official government classification, many of whom have become politically powerful in recent decades.

This brings us back to the question of migration, and the processes mediating engagement in the capitalist labour market. Aside from agrarian stress associated with monetisation and climatic change, the changes in the relationship between landlords and tenants are also significant. The break in ties of economic (through debt) and cultural dependence (through *jajmani*) on single land owners was reported by farmers to be make it easier for them to engage in migrant labour. At the same time, with improved education and communications, farmers have more knowledge of opportunities outside. As noted above, three decades ago, the political and cultural as well as economic power held by landlords over tenants, discouraged them from leaving to find work outside.

Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's (2003) study from West Bengal and Gujarat notes how labour migration itself is used as an opportunity for marginalised castes to contest local caste and class hierarchies. To some extent migration from Mithilanchal has served to further undermine the local authority of landlords on a cultural and political level (the same changes which supported rising migration), although whether this has undermined their economic authority is uncertain.

This brings us to a remaining question as to whether the mode of production can still be considered 'feudal' in character despite these changes? In Djurfeltd and Lindberg's (1975) classic study from South India, it is noted that changes in class composition over time such as the reduced dominance of a single caste or individual, means that the political-ideological 'superstructure' plays a weaker role in shaping the relations of production, even if the latter remain entrenched. The authors follow Althusser's concept of relative autonomy of superstructure, which shows that there is no 'mechanistic' causality connecting the two levels of social reality. Similarly in Mithilanchal, despite *local* changes on a cultural and political level, many of the characteristics of a feudal mode of production outlined above are still present.

Land is still concentrated amongst a small, albeit diverse class of large farmers, landlords and money lenders at the apex of the agrarian structure, with surplus being appropriated, usually in kind through rent, labour and interest. A key question in characterising the mode of production regards how surplus by landlords and money lenders is used. In the first instance, a part share of the crop provided by tenants is taken to the local mill then consumed amongst the landlords' extended family, including those living in urban areas. Sometimes it is sold for cash on the market, and in theory, this could be diverted into 'proto-capitalist' activities including investment in improved inputs and mobilisation of wage labour. However, the evidence on the ground suggested that the money generated by rent (including interest on loans) is spent on consumer goods by the family. Landlords contribution to input costs is negligible<sup>16</sup>, and as noted above, equipment purchases are themselves often opportunities to generate additional 'rents' through hiring them out to poorer farmers rather than being used to maximise productivity on their own land. This echoes Carlson's (2018) observation of non-capitalist forms of production in the Global South. When land ownership itself is not governed by the market logic (i.e. it is inherited as part of a feudal estate), owners can engage in the market through selling off the produce received as rent, but are not under competitive pressure to improve efficiency. In fact, several landlords and large farmers who were interviewed cited that they were less interested today in investing in improved inputs and hiring labourers directly in the context of higher input costs and climate stress, a profit squeeze for labour employing farmers also observed by Djurfeltd et al (2008) in Tamil Nadu. However, while in the latter study large landlords had

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<sup>16</sup> A parallel study which sampled neighbouring villages in the region showed that only 7% of land owners in Madhubani and half of those in Dhanusha had contributed to the costs of fertiliser for their sharecroppers, while none had contributed to irrigation or other input costs.

effectively left agriculture, in the context of this study it appeared more common for landlords to retain their holdings and give land out to tenants who would bear the risk. Sharecropping in this context had reportedly increased in the few years, replacing direct labour, although there is no data yet to back this up.

One may argue that cash from rent could be diverted into productive enterprises outside of agriculture. While collecting detailed information on landlord livelihoods was challenging, few of the landlords interviewed appeared to have extensive engagement in any 'capitalist' enterprises. Some derived most their income entirely from the rent they received off the land, while others had income derived from positions of political power in the village government or bureaucracy, as well as money from family members with salaried employment. To give an example, data collected on landlords' annual income sources in two villages in Madhubani (accepting that not all income may have been declared) noted that crop and livestock sales including the selling off of crop shares, were by far the highest (\$1016 on average). Income from business was \$439, but this mostly derived from only one household. Many of the industrial ventures were the domain of non-agricultural communities such as the Marwari in the case of Nepal, often based in urban centres<sup>17</sup>. Remaining average income sources included income from family members with salaried employment such as government jobs (\$278), pensions (\$90), cash rents (\$53), and rental of agricultural equipment (\$30).

#### Understanding the articulation of modes of production

Having reviewed the historical trajectory of agrarian change in Mithilanchal, marked by the persistence of a feudal mode of production and rising articulations with capitalism – this section seeks to better understand the economic and political relationship between the capitalist and pre-capitalist. Thus far it has been shown, as asserted by Li (2010), that the processes driving the peasantry from Mithilanchal into capitalist labour markets is not *directly* linked to the processes of capital accumulation which profit through employing this labour – and thus it is very different from the narratives of accumulation by dispossession applied elsewhere in the region. As Li (2010, 67) notes, the pauperisation of the peasantry cannot be considered a 'strategy' of global capitalism. In the study sites, the agrarian stress mediating the out-flow of labour is connected in part to expanding capitalist markets, most notably when one considers the rising costs of living, monetisation and associated cultural changes. However, this has limited *direct* connection to the process of capital accumulation in the vastly different sectors of the global capitalist economy where migrants find themselves, including the construction, manufacturing and tertiary industries of India, the petro-economies of the Persian Gulf<sup>18</sup>, or the plantations and factories of Malaysia. Furthermore, this conjuncture whereby agrarian stress translates into labour migration can only be understood in the context of changes within the feudal economy – namely the persisting surplus appropriation by landlords and money lenders which eats into households subsistence needs, combined with the changing relations between agrarian classes which have removed some of the barriers to labour mobility. In other words processes associated with both capitalist markets and feudal relations of

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<sup>17</sup> In the Nepal Tarai, the small 'industrialist' class is quite distinctive from the landowning class. The former have limited interest in agricultural land, mostly being from the highly mobile Marwari business community. The latter are linked to the historic tax collecting bureaucracy and continue to derive economic wealth from government service today (see Sugden and Gurung, 2012a).

<sup>18</sup> Hannieh (2016) provides an in depth analysis of the role of migrant labour in the generation of exceptional profits for 'Gulf Capitalism' in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

production and circulation in the village mean that *both* agriculture under feudal conditions and labour migration have become a core component of household livelihoods.

A key difference therefore between the migrants from Mithilanchal and the surplus labour force produced by dispossession, as described by Li (2010) and others (Habibi and Juliawan, 2018) is not only the paradoxical role of pre-capitalist agrarian relations in mediating the flow of labour to capitalism in the former, but the fact that there is limited 'dispossession' at all. Migrants' families remain engaged in agriculture – albeit in an increasingly precarious position. Tenants and marginal farmers, unable to subsist due to surplus appropriation through rent, debt, and menial farm labour, receive wages in the capitalist sector which only cover their *immediate* subsistence needs, and a small excess to send home as remittances. This excess however, by no means covers the costs of labour reproduction. In Madhubani and Dhanusha therefore, the production of grain staples off the land (including sharecropping), is a priority for all households even after the migration of a family member. In the 2014 interviews, 80% of respondents noted *no reduction* in cropping intensity since the migration of their family member, and demand for tenancy remains high. 28% of households had actually *started* renting additional land to meet their food security needs after their family members migrated<sup>19</sup>.

This also demonstrates that in spite of the 'disconnect' between the process driving migration and the needs of capital, this labour force still generates exceptional profits for the diverse sectors of the capitalist economy where it is employed. Echoing Meillassoux and Wolpe, the capitalist enterprises in which migrants work both overseas and in urban centres, receive *for free*, the cost of feeding the unproductive labourers (children and retired family members), and the costs of the labourers' sustenance while they are on leave or working the fields at home (in the case of seasonal migrants). The labour arrangements for migrants from Mithilanchal ensure they remain 'temporary' and their families remain home. In overseas migrant destinations such as the Gulf or Malaysia, this is ensured through the provision of fixed term work permits and strict employment regulations (Chalcraft, 2010, Hanieh, 2010), akin to those documented by Meillassoux (1981) with regards to African migrants in post-war Europe. In the case of migration to Indian cities, the low wages and casual nature of work ensures that migrants are obliged to maintain strong links to their home communities, as noted elsewhere (Breman, 2009, Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2009). In the 2013 survey for example, 47% of migrants from Madhubani were seasonal, returning during the monsoon paddy season. Breman (2009) refers to this movement as 'labour circulation' rather than migration – given their continued ties to the village. As he notes, "labour power, not the social unit of which it is part, is made mobile" (Breman, 2009, 6).

The case study therefore supports the assertions of past work of Meillassoux, Wolpe and the French radical anthropologists on the role played by pre-capitalist modes of production in generating exceptional profits for capitalism. What is different in Mithilanchal is the added layer of complexity posed by the presence of simultaneous surplus appropriation by a pre-capitalist landlord and money lending class. A related question is therefore how 'super-profits' for capitalism are generated when a portion of the surplus is being extracted through rent and usury. For this dual exploitation to take place, there appears to have been a reduction in the families' (including migrants) aggregate leisure time, akin to Marx's 'extension of the working day', observed under capitalism. Firstly, men appear to have increased their

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<sup>19</sup> This was both due to the selling of plots to fund migration, as well as the need for women to take land on rent to increase food security due to the sporadic nature of remittances.

contribution to the aggregate family labour time by working outside. Out of the 86 women interviewed in 2014, only 20% of men were engaged in local wage labour prior to migration.

Secondly, there has been a reduction of male labour in agriculture, and with limited change to the cropping intensity, the burden has been passed on to women – the so called ‘feminisation of agriculture’. Two thirds of women who were tenants or marginal farmers (<0.5ha) in the 2014 survey noted workload as the primary constraint to agriculture in the post-migration context. Furthermore, the survey revealed that 46% of *men* from women headed households had actually contributed regularly to reproductive work such as child care and fetching fuel prior to their migration, further increasing women’s workload when they left. It can thus be argued that labour in neither mode of production meets the subsistence and reproductive needs of marginal and tenant farmers alone. A portion of ‘necessary’ labour time<sup>20</sup> is performed in the capitalist and pre-capitalist sector to cover cash and food needs respectively, and the surplus labour time is in-effect ‘shared’ between landlord-money lenders and capitalist employers (see also Sugden, 2013).

### Structural power, class interests and the trajectory of change

This last section considers the longer term trajectory of change and the structures which tie the constitutive elements of this articulation of modes of production together, both at the scale of the overlapping social formations of Nepal and India as well as within the larger global capitalist economy. While there is a clear disconnect between the processes driving farmers into the diverse sectors of the capitalist economy and the generation of super-profits by capitalist employers, this does not mean that power is ‘fluid and dispersed’ as Glassman (2003) notes in his critique of the ‘poststructural’ Marxist position<sup>21</sup>. In other words, this paper would stop short of considering the multiple class relationships (e.g. between landlord and tenant or between migrant worker and capitalist employer), as independent unconnected mechanisms of surplus appropriation, (or ‘class processes’, as conceptualised by Gibson-Graham and Resnick and Wolff). Likewise, the sharing of surplus between the capitalist and pre-capitalist mode of production cannot be considered purely coincidental.

Read (2002), in his discussion of primitive accumulation in England, noted like Li (2010) and this paper, that the army of surplus labour generated by feudal enclosure was not directly connected to the process of emergent capitalism, yet the capitalism took advantage of the opportunity this generated. He draws upon Althusser’s concept of *détournement* whereby the effects of one process are seized to serve other often unrelated purposes – which in this case was the generation of a capitalist labour force. He notes

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<sup>20</sup> According to Marx (1974) in (Capital Vol 1, chapter 9) necessary labour time is the period of the working day whereby labourers produce enough for their own subsistence (e.g. food, clothes) and to reproduce their labour power (e.g. childcare, education). Anything in excess of this is surplus labour time.

<sup>21</sup> As Glassman (2003, 681) notes with regards to capitalism: “Capitalists do not just dominate workers as one group of persons dominating another. Rather, the ability of capitalists to collectively dominate workers—which is always contested and in need of re-creation—resides in their capacity to exploit workers through control over investment decisions upon which workers and others in society are dependent, a capacity that is inscribed in legal structures, customary practices, institutions of repressive force, and networks of social relations.”



importantly that the state and legal apparatus played an important role in organising and transforming the army of disenfranchised peasants and labourers to become compliant wage workers for capitalism, echoing Glassman (2003) who emphasizes that structural power can be exercised not just on an economic, but on a political or ideological level.

To better understand the structural power which ties the seemingly unrelated flows of surplus between the Mithilanchal peasantry on the one hand, and disparate classes of capitalist employers and feudal landlords on the other, it is worth exploring whether there is a convergence (or divergence) of class interests which are at play when these two modes of production interact, and its political manifestation.

With regards to migration from Mithilanchal, while diverse capitalist employers are drawing substantial profits from migrant labour, their interests are not necessarily in conflict with those of landed classes in the labour sending regions, and they could even be argued to align. If the migrant wages or levels of employment improved to the point that farmers would no longer depend on tenancy or loans, larger landlords would perhaps be compelled to lower rents, while employing more tenants as direct labourers (separating them from the land). One may expect intensification of production through capital investment so landlords and rich farmers could pay farm wages equivalent to what is available in the capitalist sector and extract relative surplus value<sup>22</sup>. However, in the five years of research, farmer testimonies reported no downward pressure on rents, and as noted above, capital investment is limited.

In fact, the two modes of production supplement each other, as argued extensively in an earlier study (Sugden, 2013). Feudal relations of production constrain marginal and tenant farmers from subsisting through agriculture. This drives them to simultaneously compete for work as migrants in the capitalist sector, particularly as they seek to repay loans and meet urgent cash needs. They are willing to receive migrant wages which do not (on their own) cover the entire cost of family subsistence and labour reproduction, supported by their continued ties to the land, benefitting capitalism. Meanwhile, levels of employment and wages in the capitalist sector remain at levels that ensure competition for tenancies and loans in migrants' home communities do not drop with an influx of remittances, favouring landlords and money lenders.

This convergence of interests can be considered neither an active 'strategy' of capital, nor a coincidental alignment of class interests. Instead this represents landlords and capitalist employers seizing an opportunity for surplus appropriation at a given historical juncture marked by the uneven development of capitalism within the South Asia. The remaining question is the degree to which state intervention facilitates the active reproduction of this articulation.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully analyse the crystallisation of class interests at a political level, it may be useful to revisit the concept of a 'semi-colonial' social formation. Chandra (1974), Sau (1975) and Gupta (1977) for example, asserted that while India was integrated into the global capitalist system, imperialism had impeded the organic development of domestic capitalism, and thus capitalist employment has not risen above a threshold whereby landlord power is undermined. This paves the way for an accommodation between historically divergent interests of landed elites who appropriate surplus from the peasantry, and a capitalist class (Lin, 1980), and the interests of both groups reproduced through the political apparatus of the state (Ghosh, 1988). Similar arguments were applied to Nepal by Blaikie et

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<sup>22</sup> This is akin Marx's transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist ground rent (Marx, 1967, 751-771)

al (2001) and the then Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai (2003)<sup>23</sup>, where it was argued that the bureaucracy was oriented to serve comprador and landed interests as a direct legacy from the centralised state sanctioned feudalism of the Rana era.

Much has changed in the economy of South Asia in subsequent years, and how the class interests of the bureaucracy and state apparatus have evolved requires more research. It is nevertheless, likely that neo-liberal policies adopted by both states have reinforced rather than undermined both landed and comprador capitalist interests. Economic restructuring in both countries has allowed the domestic comprador bourgeoisie to intensify their profits through the expansion of markets for imported goods, further undermining local production while increasing expenditure of the poor (see also Sugden et al., 2018). This in turn sustains a continued flow of low wage migrant labour to the capitalist sector. Meanwhile, farmers' dependence on landlords is reinforced under neoliberal policies by the relatively limited growth in manufacturing jobs alongside a burgeoning service sector, and the shift towards increasingly casual employment, often in construction (Kar, 2018, Sugden, 2009). Aside from neoliberal restructuring, state policy in both Bihar and Nepal arguably continue to serve landed interest, most notably by the persistent failure to implement long promised land reforms (Rorabacher, 2016, Alden-Wily et al., 2008). The vested interests are all the more striking in Nepal, whereby the land reform agenda has been all but forgotten (Sugden et al., 2016), in spite of it being a key rallying cry of last decade's People's War and the recent integration of the former communists into the ruling government.

It should be noted that the class alliances at play in the context of migrant labour overseas from the Nepal side of the border and their political manifestation are perhaps more complex. Once again, the acceptance of thousands of Nepali workers whose reproduction costs are covered by the pre-capitalist sector is an 'opportunity' seized by the Gulf states, yet they have *no role* in actually driving labourers from agriculture or any direct stake in policies within Nepal which favour landed or comprador capitalist interests. This migration does nevertheless serve these elite interests within Nepal. It represents a safety valve in the context of a stagnant industrial sector and persistent concentration of land (Blaikie et al., 2001), while remittances themselves serve to bolster the import based comprador economy (Sugden et al., 2018). There is also the lucrative manpower sector which has strong political protection, whereby middlemen generate significant profit from fees charged to migrants (Taylor-Nicholson et al., 2014), another form of surplus appropriation worthy of further study in the future.

## Conclusion

This paper has raised critical questions on how we understand the process of capitalist expansion into peripheral corners of the world economy. While Mithilanchal and the larger Eastern Gangetic Plains has emerged into an important labour pool for regional centres of capital accumulation in South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, the supply of this labour is by no means part of a linear trajectory of subordination to an omnipotent global capitalism.

The paper firstly notes how the economic processes driving the peasantry into the labour force are not directly connected to the process of capitalist accumulation in the diverse locales where labour is employed. Climatic stress and expanding capitalist markets are generating change within the feudal mode of production at the grassroots with falling returns, rising costs of living and shifting aspirations of younger

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<sup>23</sup> Although in the Nepal case, the comprador class is enriched through the country's subordinate position to India as well as within the global capitalist system.

farmers. However, while the subsequent agrarian stress has contributed to an unprecedented rise in labour migration over the last three decades, recent internal shifts in the feudal agrarian relations have played a mediating role. These include a reconfiguration in the structure of the landlord-money lending class, localised class struggles, and disintegrating ties of bondage to landlords, set against the very limited change (on an economic level) in the patterns of feudal surplus appropriation at the grassroots. Sharecropping, labour for landlords, and usury continue to the push marginal and tenant farmer majority over a threshold beyond which they cannot subsist within agriculture alone.

The paper secondly, asserts that in spite of the complex processes mediating migration, it still generates considerable profit for capitalism, while also benefitting pre-capitalist surplus appropriating classes. The resultant 'sharing' of surplus points to a complex pattern of agrarian transition, yet it would be wrong to dismiss these disparate axes of exploitation as unrelated or coincidental. There are evolving (albeit loose) class alliances at home which have served the interests of particular sectors within the domestic capitalist economy as well as pre-capitalist landlord/money lending classes, although the former is by no means 'functional' to capitalism. In the context of Nepal and India, the state likely plays some role in crystallizing these alliances, reviving debates over the concept of the 'semi-colonial' social formation whereby there is a convergence of interests between a comprador capitalist and landed elite, although migration overseas points to looser and more complex relationships between surplus appropriating classes.

This paper highlights the continued utility of the Althusserian method to understand agrarian transition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This includes a recognition that multiple modes of production can – and still do – co-exist, while acknowledging that transition and change take place through multifarious processes on an economic, political, ecological as well as cultural level which don't connect in a simplistic manner. While many of the changes at the level of the superstructure (e.g. consumerism or reduced ideological power of landlords) are connected to larger structural economic processes, there is not a functional overlap. The radical anthropological tradition which is derived from the Althusser, allows one to espouse pre-ordained theories of capitalist expansion, and identify the distinctive character of given modes of production in time and space, their relationship with others and the class alliances which facilitate their reproduction.

Finally, in an era of unprecedented global migration the paper serves to remind scholars and political activists of the growing importance of the migrant labour pool to global capitalism, particularly when one considers the exceptional profits which can be gained by migrants' continued ties to their home communities. This echoes the division Fraser (2018) conceptualises between the dwindling population of 'citizen-workers' of the core, and the 'expropriable' workers of the periphery. Nevertheless in seeking alliances and avenues for political struggle, one also needs to engage with and understand pre-capitalist modes of production, including the class alliances which shape their articulation with capitalism. These older economic formations represent important axes of exploitation in their own right, while also playing an important role in mediating the outflow of wage labour from peripheral locales of the world economy.

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## Labour migration, capitalist accumulation and feudal reproduction: A historical analysis from the Eastern Gangetic Plains

### Tables

**Table 1: No of interviews, focus groups and quantitative surveys carried out by district**

District	2013 farmer interviews	2013 Focus groups	2013 quantitative surveys	2014 women farmer interviews	2014 survey	2015 census survey
Dhanusha	20	4	133	44	199	NA
Madhubani	20	4	171	42	200	852
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>852</b>

**Table 2: Land ownership structure in Dhanusha 1981 - 2011**

Year	Dhanusha	
	% land owned by households with >3 ha	% households with land holdings <0.5 ha
1981-2	41.65	54.35
1991-2	37.67	43.78
2001-2	27.77	50.40
2010-11	14.02	46.18

Source: Nepal National Sample Census of Agriculture, 1992 – 2011)

**Table 3: Land ownership structure in Bihar 1971 - 2003**

Year	% households with <1ha	% households with 1-2ha	% households with >2ha	% area owned by households with >2 ha
2003	89.4	25.29	3.5	32.72
1992	80.56	23.84	8.34	47.57
1982	76.55	22.91	10.92	53.14
1971-2	71.71	23.43	13.18	58.37

Source: (NSSO, 2006)

**Table 4: Per cent of sample, tenancy status and proportion of land owned by farmer land ownership category (not including absentee landlords)**

District	Village	Landless labour			<0.5ha			0.5-1ha			1-2ha			>2ha		
		% of sample	% renting in land	% of land owned	% of sample	% renting in land	% of land owned	% of sample	% renting in land	% of land owned	% of sample	% renting in land	% of land owned	% of sample	% renting in land	% of land owned
Dhanusha, Nepal	Thadi Jijha <sup>i</sup>	16	15	0	30	50	9	25	35	22	13	10	20	15	0	49
	Ekrahi <sup>i</sup>	17	22	0	54	31	21	17	22	22	6	0	16	7	25	41
	Giddha <sup>ii</sup>	11	91	0	41	28	15	23	13	26	20	25	40	4	0	19
	Raghunathpur <sup>ii</sup>	31	74	0	27	33	12	16	13	19	19	11	36	6	0	33
Madhubani, India	Bhagwatipur <sup>iii</sup>	33	82	0	47	60	19	14	48	22	3	33	8	4	0	51
	Mahuyahi <sup>iii</sup>	60	35	0	28	24	27	9	2	31	2	0	13	1	0	29
	Bhupatti <sup>i</sup>	45	32	0	31	21	9	10	17	9	6	0	11	8	0	70
	Rakuwari <sup>i</sup>	23	56	0	53	43	28	14	33	26	7	38	27	3	33	19
	Nanaur <sup>ii</sup>	39	51	0	38	32	21	7	14	12	14	7	55	2	50	12
	Korahiya <sup>ii</sup>	32	44	0	36	31	15	13	15	18	14	14	40	5	0	27
Average		31	50	0	38	35	18	15	21	21	10	14	27	6	11	35

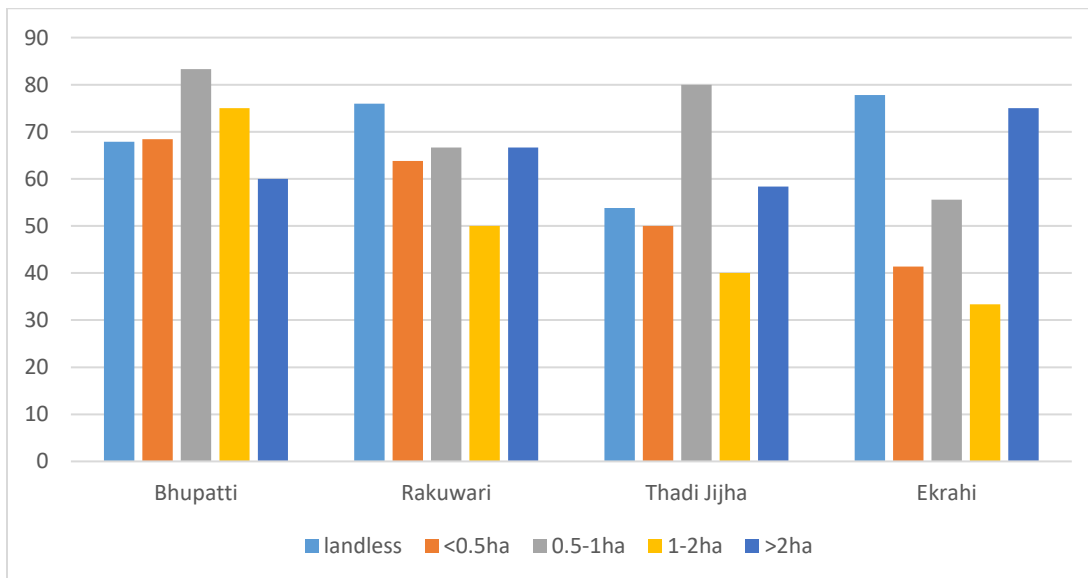
Source: 2013 survey <sup>i</sup>, 2014 survey <sup>ii</sup> and 2015 <sup>iii</sup> census survey

## Figures

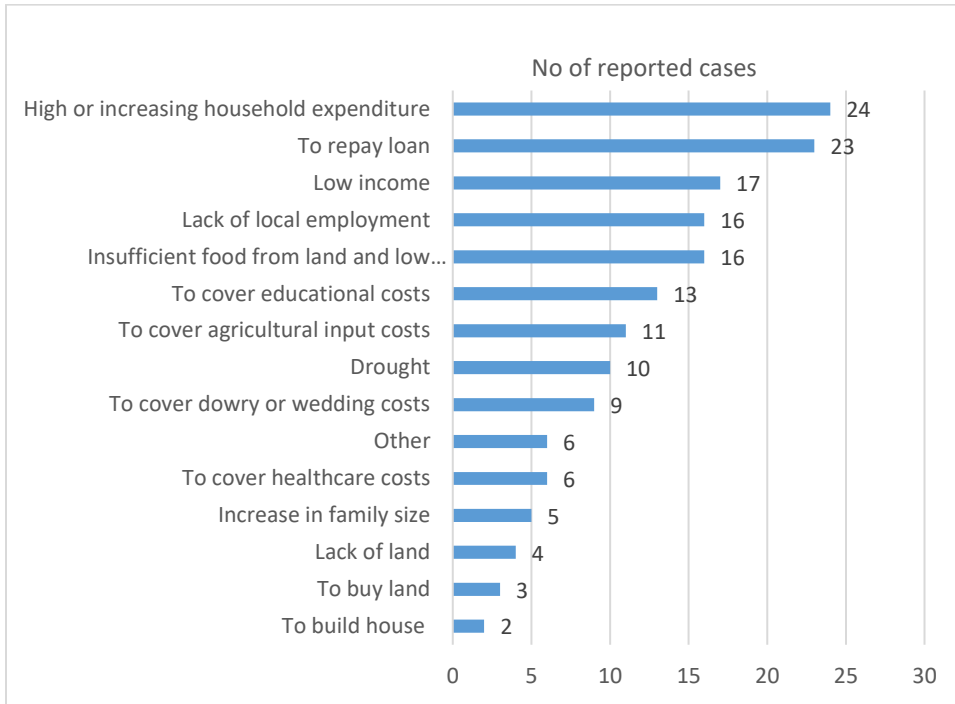
Figure 1: Map of study sites



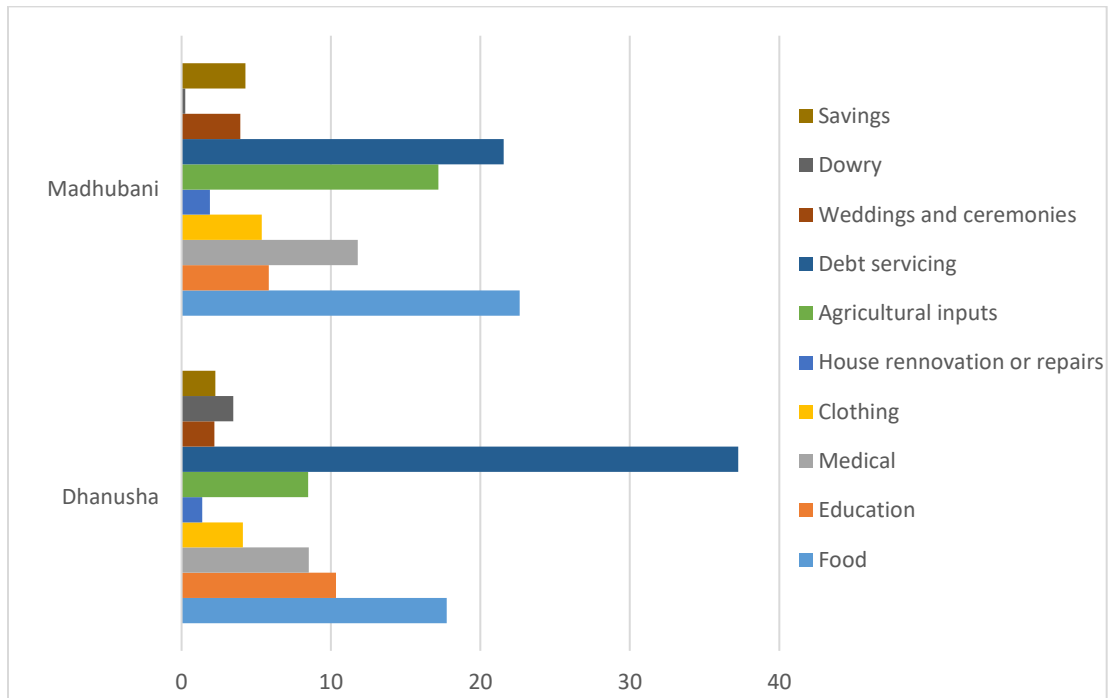
Figure 2: % of households with labour migrants in Dhanusha and Madhubani (2013 survey)



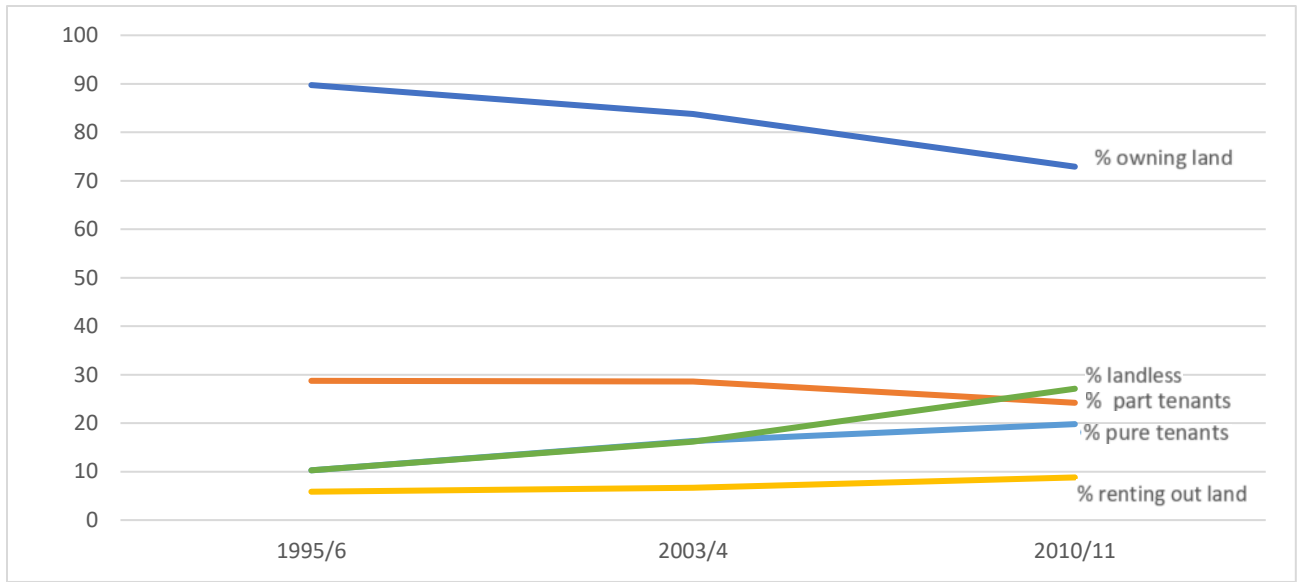
**Figure 3: Reported factors contributing to migration decision making (no of cases) in Madhubani and Dhanusha (2014 interviews)**



**Figure 4: Average % allocation of remittances according to farmer land ownership category in Madhubani and Dhanusha (2014 interviews)**



**Figure 5: Change in % of tenancy and land ownership in East and Central Tarai of Nepal**



Source: Nepal National Living Standards Measurement Survey, 1995/6 – 2010/11.