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# When the Young Men Leave: Social Implications of Migration and Remittances among the Tharu of Chitwan, Nepal

Andrea D. Grimaldi

Macalester College, [andrea.grimaldi19@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.grimaldi19@gmail.com)

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# **When the young men leave: Social impact of migration and remittances among the Tharus of Chitwan, Nepal**

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**Andrea Grimaldi**

**Dr. Arjun Guneratne, Advisor**

*Department of Anthropology*

—April 2016—

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**Abstract**

In Pipariya, an ethnically mixed village in the Chitwan district of Nepal, young Tharu men are migrating for labor to the Arab Gulf countries and Malaysia. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this project examines motivations to migrate as well as the impact of remittances on the stay-home population. I argue that migration is a strategy utilized by Tharu households to pursue upward social mobility in a multi-ethnic context. Remittances, as a social agreement and the material outcome of migration, increase the family's income, enabling a reduction in social class differences and the redefinition of traditional women's roles.

*Cover image: Houses along the main road of Pipariya, Nepal*

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## **Chapter 1: The road to migration**

### **Part 1: Introduction**

“No man is an island” begins a poem written in 1624 by the English poet and cleric John Donne. The poem speaks about how by being part of the human race we should care equally about every human death. With these words, Donne motivates his listeners to overcome social differences. Almost four hundred years later, although humans are more interconnected than ever and are less of an "island", inequalities and disparities are unfortunately not in decline. Regional differences in economic opportunities have pushed people out of less economically advantageous areas and pulled them into zones where jobs and services are readily available. The movement of people from one place to another in search of better economic and social opportunities happens within and outside a country's borders, seasonally or permanently. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that there are around 224 million international migrants in the world, and 150 million of them migrate exclusively in search of work (ILO 2016).

While some families or groups of people decide to permanently relocate somewhere else, other families decide to send only one member abroad. This person maintains a connection to his or her place of origin by sending money—known as remittances—back to their relatives. According to the World Bank, \$441 billion dollars were sent in 2015 by relatives abroad to families all over the developing and the developed world (World Bank 2015). While the amount of remittances in net amount of dollars might be higher for workers from developed countries, it is in the developing

world where remittances have a greater impact (Paerregaard 2014). Even a small amount of money sent from abroad can create a great difference for low-income households.

This ethnography focuses on labor migration and remittances in one specific area of the world: Nepal. This country's relationship with migration and remittances is a long-term and intricate one, making it a relevant place for the study of these topics. Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) estimates that 2.2 million Nepalis are currently working abroad. In 2014 alone, the DOFE issued 512,878 foreign labor permits. Remittance money contributed 29.1% of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product for the 2013/2014 period and the amount of remittances per household per year is NR40,600—around \$381, (DOFE Report 2014). Migration is an economic strategy for many Nepali families, and the impact of remittances is deeply felt by Nepal's smaller villages as well as larger cities.

Labor migration is by no means a recent phenomenon in the Nepali society. Young men have left the country to be part of foreign armies or to work abroad, mainly in India, for several generations. What is new, however, is the growth in number of men and women who leave the country today. While in 2009 between 700 and 800 workers left Nepal every day for destinations other than India (Bruslé 2009), in 2014 the daily estimate was 2,000 people (Washington Post 2014). Migrants' destinations have also expanded, as it has become easier for workers to obtain jobs in Asian countries outside of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, Nepalis are in constant interaction with foreign societies, either personally, or indirectly through a migrant family member. While understanding the economic impact of remittances allows us to quantify Nepal's

economic development, studying the cultural impact of migration on both the person who leaves Nepal and the stay-behind family sheds light on social changes accelerated by the transfer of money—and people—between communities of the developing and the developed world.

Nepal is a diverse country, with 125 different caste and ethnic groups, and more than 123 nationally recognized languages spoken (CBS 2011). As such, it is problematic to generalize what Nepal's cultural practices are. The reality of one particular caste or ethnic group might differ greatly from the others. In this ethnography, I do not make claims about migration practices and the impact of remittances on the entirety of Nepal. Rather, I have focused on one specific group: the Tharu of Chitwan district.

In this ethnography, I will look at the different motivations for migration among the Tharus in the village of Pipariya, in the Tarai lowlands of Nepal, where I conducted fieldwork. I argue that labor migration has the capacity of generating upward social mobility among Tharu households. In this process of migration, gender roles and class hierarchies are altered. I believe it is remittances, the social and material agreement between the migrant and the left-behind family, what enables the alteration of traditional social structures.

The questions that guide my initial research are: what is it about the social and economic landscape of the village that pushes young Tharus to migrate? And, given that labor migration to Gulf countries and Malaysia is the most popular form of migration, what are the procedures Tharu people need to follow to engage in this kind of migration? Secondly, I will look at the impact of migration on the social landscape. I will focus on

three questions: Have remittances been able to alter the ways in which Tharus relate to other ethnic and caste groups in Nepal? To what extent have remittances changed gender relations and transformed the role of women in the community? And finally, how do remittances modify the traditional Tharu social hierarchy?

In this study, I consider the household to be an indivisible unit, and as such, the decision to migrate is in part approved by all its adult members. At the same time, because household members fulfill different roles, migration and remittances do not impact each person equally. I explain how the migrant himself, generally a son or a young husband, decides to migrate in order to contribute to the household income, while at the same time expanding his status within the community. Analysis of only migrant experiences, however, is incomplete, as it fails to explain the impact on the stay-behind household members. Because of the gendered nature of migration, women make up most of the stay-behind population. As such, although this ethnography does not focus entirely on gender, it does analyze the way in which migration and remittances are currently transforming the role of women in Pipariya's society.

The Tharu are a group particularly situated within Nepal's physical and demographic landscape, as the coming chapters will illustrate. My aim is to expand the conversation about a population within Nepal that has been largely understudied. This ethnography also seeks to explain migratory practices of groups outside of the hill region of Nepal—where most of the research on Nepali migration has focused so far. I hope that the stories and experiences of these families will help us humanize moving populations,

and understand challenges that are common across the experiences of millions of migrant workers throughout the world.

## **Part 2: Methodology**

During the weeks preceding the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, I encountered an article in *The Guardian* by Robert Booth condemning the death of Nepalis working in the construction of Qatar's stadiums for the 2022 World Cup. The article estimated that by 2022, 4,000 Nepalis will have died in the construction sites. Unlike the message that John Donne conveys in his poem, these workers' lives had little value. They were almost invisible. To their employers, they were second-class humans, not worthy of implementing safety regulations in the workspace, or receiving any benefits and compensations. To the media that portrayed them, these were defenseless individuals, manipulated and abused by employers, vulnerable because of their poverty-stricken backgrounds. The article, although well researched, maintained a sensationalist tone that is much present in all the news articles that describe the situations of Nepalis—and other South and South East Asian workers—in the Arab Gulf countries.

The lack of agency in the way Nepalis were portrayed in these articles motivated me to learn more about international labor migration. While in Nepal during the fall of 2014, I heard countless stories of struggle and also of success from Nepalis not only in Qatar, but also in other parts of the Arab world and Asia. In all the villages I visited there were several families who had at least one member working abroad. Labor migration is a phenomenon that touches almost every Nepali man and woman, whether personally or

through a migrating family member. Noticing the prevalence migration had in the daily lives of Nepalis, I decided to further investigate the stories of migrants and their families.

The data on which this ethnography is based was gathered in two different periods of fieldwork. First, during the fall of 2014, I spent a total of four months in Nepal. During the first three months I had several informal conversations with men who had migrated, and with women whose husbands had migrated. These people came from different districts, and belonged to different castes and ethnic groups. I also interviewed members at a local NGO that helps Nepali migrant workers. Towards the end of my program I decided to spend time in a small village in the Chitwan district. I was advised to stay in this village because of the large number of its inhabitants who had decided to migrate.

I also chose this village because its population is split between Tharus—one of Nepal's indigenous groups from the Tarai—and Bahuns—high-caste hill people. I was interested in learning about migratory practices of Nepal's indigenous groups, as they are uniquely situated in Nepal's diverse society. I was lucky enough to be welcomed into this community through a young Tharu entrepreneur. Before beginning my study, I had read several studies that focused on the effects of out-migration on either hill caste groups, or hill indigenous people. However, migration studies in the Tarai focused mainly on the movement of people to India, and no studies have been conducted on migration among the Tharu people in general, and the Tharu of Chitwan in particular. My own experience in Pipariya demonstrated the importance of shedding light on Tharu international migration, as it is a much more common practice than the literature indicates. I lived with

a Tharu family in the small village of Pipariya<sup>1</sup> for three weeks, where I interviewed 13 returned migrant workers, 14 women whose husbands had migrated, and four young men who were preparing to leave the country.

In December of 2015, a year after my initial fieldwork, I returned to Nepal thanks to the Spradley Summer Research Fund, a generous award from the Anthropology Department at Macalester College. I spent one month in Pipariya interviewing a wide range of community members: returned migrants, their parents, Bahuns and Tharu non-migrants, microcredit entities, and educated Bahun and Tharu women. I did this in order to get as much of a complex and nuanced perspective as I could in the short period of time I spent in the village. In total, between my two fieldwork experiences, I conducted more than 50 interviews and 30 surveys, and spent countless hours listening to stories from the village and about migration, while sitting around the fire in the cold winter nights. I am forever thankful to the community of Pipariya for welcoming me into their lives and allowing me to share their stories with the rest of the world.

### **Part 3: Road Map**

This ethnography is divided in six chapters. The first one includes this short introduction, and the methods I utilized in order to be able to write the ethnography. The second chapter will introduce us to the history of the Tharu and of Pipariya, and how it came to be the ethnically mixed village it is today. By analyzing internal migration practices, we will begin to understand the motivations for international labor migration.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of places and people have been changed to protect the integrity of my informants.



The chapter will also discuss the politics of Nepal, and the long-term engagement this society has had with labor migration.

Chapter three analyses the literature on migration and remittances on an international level. It focuses first on the economic study of these two phenomena, and moves on to discuss their social, political and cultural implications. The chapter will also provide examples to begin understanding the pervasive nature of labor migration and the impact it has in the sending communities. It will also provide a theoretical framework through which we can become closer to the migrants' experiences. I argue that remittances as a livelihood strategy, as well as a reciprocal relationship between the migrant and the stay-behind family, motivate international movement, uplifting in the process the social status of the migrants.

The fourth chapter describes the motivations to migrate. It begins by analyzing employment possibilities at home—or lack thereof—that push young men to leave Pipariya. It also analyses push and pull factors of migration in Pipariya, and the necessary steps that migrants need to take in order to be employed abroad. It ends by providing a view of what "abroad" means to the migrants, and how some of these ideas are retransmitted to the home community. Chapter five shifts the perspective away from the migrant, and focuses on the changes that take place at home after the young men leave and begin remitting money. Social classes and gender relations are two areas where we can perceive strong changes in the community due to migration. Remittances have impacted the resources that stay-behind women manage, slowly indicating

transformations of traditional gender roles. Remittances have also had a positive effect in decreasing socio-economic inequalities.

I conclude this thesis with the hope that labor migration will allow Tharus of Pipariya to expand their incomes, while at the same time allowing the space for traditionally underprivileged populations to prosper. The changes in gender roles, class, and caste dynamics that can already be perceived indicate the dynamic nature of migrant populations.

## Chapter 2: Locating Pipariya

They arrive every evening at 7:00 pm, with impeccable punctuality. A few of them bring chairs, others bring firewood, and a few latecomers will improvise seats with dry logs. They set a small fire, and gather around it. For two hours the conversation will flow, more participants will arrive, while others leave. Hindi or Nepali songs will play from someone's cell phone. I call them the Brotherhood of the Returned. They are all young men from this village in the lowlands of Nepal. They are between 20 and 35 years of age, not younger and not older. They have something else in common: they have all worked abroad for a period of time, in either the Arab Gulf countries or Malaysia.

The language of the conversation is generally Tharu, the local language and native to most of these young men. Sometimes, a friend of theirs from a different ethnic group also attends, in which case the conversation is mixed between Tharu and Nepali. The topics of conversations are varied, from town gossips, to adventures in the adjacent jungle, and even information from abroad. This last topic is the most popular. They tell personal stories about their experiences abroad, how they confused the Arabic word *taʿl* (imperative for 'to come') with the Nepali word *taal* ('plate') and handed a plate from the pile they were washing to the Saudi supervisor who was calling them to his office. Other times they tell each other about opportunities they know, a job offer as a truck driver in Bahrain, or a position in a metal factory in Malaysia, of which they heard from a distant cousin. By 9:00 pm, all signs of the meeting will have disappeared. They will quietly put the chairs back, put out the fire, and leave. This ritual will recommence the following night.

## **Part 1: Understanding the Tarai and the Tharu of Chitwan**

These evening gatherings of the Brotherhood of the Returned take place in Pipariya, a small, ethnically mixed village of Chitwan, one of the Inner Tarai valleys of Nepal. The Tarai is the geographic region that lies to the south of the foothills of the Himalayas, and the northern part of the Indo-Gangetic plain. This region delimits the frontier between India and Nepal. In Nepal, the Tarai region is 900 kilometers long and covers around 23% of the country's total area (Guneratne 1994). In certain parts the Siwaliks, a range of low-lying hills, diverge from the main mountain range below the Himalaya, the Mahabharat, creating valleys or *doons* such as Chitwan (Guneratne 1994). Historically, there is evidence that the Tarai was a region of great importance for the development of Buddhism (Trevor and Smythies, cited in Guneratne 1994:68), but this importance faded towards the fourth century, and the region became covered in the sal forests that characterized it until a few decades ago.

Pipariya is specifically located in the Chitwan district, which is an important region in the country in economic, social and political terms, and which has seen a large demographic transformation in the last few decades. The Chitwan district comprises the *doon* valley as well as the adjacent hill areas. This valley is a strategic region, as it provides immediate access to the Kathmandu valley from the south. Relatively isolated during the nineteenth century, malaria kept people from the Indian plains and the Nepali hills from populating the area. Travelers would avoid spending the night in the area, and only crossed it during the colder, less mosquito-infested winter months. The Nepali state chose to maintain Chitwan as a natural, inaccessible barrier to protect the Kathmandu Valley from the rapidly expanding British Raj.

Before the eradication of malaria, the Chitwan valley was inhabited by groups like the Bote, the Musahar and the Tharus. These groups were marginalized within Nepal and had limited contact with the government of Kathmandu. During the first half of the 20th century, the Chitwan valley used to be the Nepali royalty's hunting grounds. The landscape around Pipariya and through most of the valley is flat and subtropical, much different from the mountainous terrain of the rest of Nepal. Different species of wild animals inhabit the region, including tigers, rhinos, elephants, deer, and crocodiles. Pipariya is located almost adjacent to the national park where these animals are currently found. During the time of the Rana rulers, large amounts of land were fenced and designated as King's property, and were used solely as winter-season hunting areas. The local population maintained its relative autonomy and isolation.

In the 1950s, Nepal's government changed the way it approached the Tarai territories. The Inner Tarai valleys became targets of development, considering the technical difficulties of developing a modern agricultural system in the hills. The clearing of these valleys was expected to alleviate the population of the hills by offering new productive farmland (Müller-Böker 1999). In 1955 a motorway was built through the Rapti valley and with the help of the government of the United States, a malaria eradication program was implemented. In the late 1970s Narayangath, Chitwan's largest town, was linked by road to Nepal's East-West highway, making it accessible from cities all over Nepal and also from India. This decision located Narayangath at the center of the country's transportation system, attracting government services, business investments, and jobs. The effects of this development were felt throughout the Chitwan Valley. Over time, a regular bus service arose to connect the Valley residents to schools, police

stations, health centers, employment, and other public and private resources (Bohra and Massey 2009:625). Nowadays, it is even possible to obtain a Master's Degree without having to leave the district, and one of Nepal's most well equipped hospitals is located in Chitwan.

After the eradication of malaria and the development of roads and infrastructure, people from Nepal's hills moved into Chitwan transforming the social structure and relationships of the region. These migrant groups included different hill ethnic groups, such as Newars, Gurungs, Tamangs, as well as high-caste hill groups like Bahuns and Chhetris. These groups are called *pahaariyas* by the Tharus. *Pahaariya* means, in Nepali, "someone from the *pahaar* or hills". This movement of people into the Tarai changed the demographics of the area drastically. The following table includes census data from 2011 regarding the ethnic composition of Chitwan district:

Table 1 - Ten largest caste/ethnic groups in Chitwan district

<b>Caste/Ethnic group</b>	<b>Number of people</b>	<b>Percentage of population</b>
Brahmin/Bahun	165,625	28.6%
Chhetri	65,894	11.4%
Tharu	63,395	10.9%
Tamang	46,198	7.9%
Gurung	39,155	6.8%
Newar	30,256	5.2%
Kami	28,318	4.9%
Magar	27,985	4.8%
Damai/Dholi	12,101	2.1%
Sarki	7,218	1.2%
Others	93,839	16.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>579,984</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics 2011

After the influx of hill migrants, Tharus were confronted with the loss of their land and social position to these new comers. According to Guneratne (1994), in 1971 the percentage of the population that spoke Tharu in Chitwan was 13.46%. The 2011 Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) census data shows that today 10.1% of the total population of the district declares Tharu as their mother tongue. There has been a continuous decline in the share of Tharu population, generating a strong sense of resentment towards *pahariyaas*, and social tensions between the Tharu and Bahuns. Animosity between the high caste groups and other lower caste and ethnic groups exist not only in Chitwan, but also in the rest of the country.

In the village development committee (VDC) where Pipariya is located, Tharu people are still a large percentage of the population. 48% of the households belong to this ethnic community. Bahuns represent 28% of the population. The remaining 24% of the VDC's population is made up of other groups of hill-migrants as well as low caste and untouchable groups (CBS 2011). While Pipariya is predominantly Tharu, the presence of Bahuns is also strongly felt. These two main groups live in different parts of the village and only interact with each other in particular situations. Interaction is strong between the Tharu male elites and the Bahun males. Children and teenagers attend some of the same schools, but groups of friends are seldom ethnically mixed. Tharu women interact with Bahun women through the local microfinance groups, but these women also prefer to stay within their own linguistic communities, where they feel more comfortable.

Tharu people define themselves as *aadivaasi*—indigenous inhabitants of the land. The main economic activity of the Tharu has always been agriculture and cattle herding.

With large amounts of land available for a small population, Tharus never encountered the problem of land scarcity. Before a land registration system was implemented by the Nepali state, Tharus used to live semi-nomadic lifestyles and practiced shifting cultivation (McLean 1999). Immigration, resettlement and land reform policies of the 1960s changed land availability drastically, and many Tharus, unaware of the monetary value of their own fields, sold land at very cheap prices.

There are also other groups that inhabited Chitwan before the migration from the hills. The following table contains information from the Malaria Eradication Program about the percentage of Pipariya's population that identified as an indigenous or non-hill ethnic group in 1990.

Table 2 - Indigenous/non-hill ethnic groups in selected Village Development Board in Chitwan, 1990-1991

Ethnic group	Total	% of total
Tharu	3723	93.21
Bhote	29	0.73
Musaher	75	1.88
Kumal	102	2.55
Darai	65	1.63

Source: Guneratne (1994:100)

The table shows that Tharus were the largest community that did not identify as a hill migrant. In relationship to these other groups, Tharus have been traditionally more powerful, and remain so. Tharus consider the Darai, Musaher, and Kumal to be much inferior to themselves (Guneratne 1994:99).



After the arrival of hill migrants of higher caste, Tharus came to occupy a middle status in the local society. This redefined their understanding of themselves as a group, as these newcomers considered Tharus to be backward farmers and people of the jungle—*jangli* in Nepali—in relation to the educated, more business oriented Bahuns. Despite the fact that the hierarchical differences between these two groups are rooted in the caste system, few Tharus regard Bahuns as spiritually superior to themselves (Müller-Böker 1999). Bahuns in Chitwan do not follow many of the caste purity restrictions they are expected to follow, such as avoiding the consumption of alcohol or meat. Guneratne (1999) states "[Tharus] supposed backwardness is believed by most Tharus, and in particular the young, to stem not from inferiority in the ritual sphere, but in the economic [...] not because they are of low ritual status in relation to Brahmins but because they are uneducated" (165). The desire of the Tharu community to improve their social status, therefore, is expressed as a need to educate the community better, and to move away from traditional farming into more business oriented activities.

Education, however, has failed to improve the perceived status of Tharus in Nepal, as many Tharus, especially those from poorer families, still have not achieved high levels of education. International labor migration has come to fill the vacuum, and is seen by many Tharus as an opportunity to improve their socio-economic status and bridge the overall gap between them and the Bahuns. As Ramesh, a young man from Pipariya expecting to get his working visa to Malaysia, explained: "We have no jobs here, but we also have no education. We are poor, we don't go to good schools, and we don't have good jobs. If I work abroad, I can make better money than in Nepal, and it will

be better for my family". Upward social mobility is the main motivation for Tharu labor migration.

Internal migration from the hills to Chitwan and Pipariya, and the lack of well-paying jobs available in the area, combined with the opportunities created by foreign markets to work abroad, lead to the large number of migrating young men. While labor migration in Nepal is by no means a new phenomenon, for the Tharu people it is a recent endeavor. Motivated by the desire to improve the socio-economic status of their families, more and more young Tharus are venturing abroad in search of employment.

## **Part 2: Nepal, two centuries of migration**

Migration and remittances have a long history in Nepal, as Nepali people in general and Nepali men in particular have migrated for several generations. During the nineteenth century, Nepali *Gurkhas* began to be recruited into the British Indian army. For many decades, people have also descended from the hills of Nepal into India to work seasonally as manual labor, field workers, security guides, domestics and low-level public servants. Since the 1990s, however, a new kind of migration has emerged. With democratization and the liberalization of the economy, Nepal has become integrated into the movement of people to the expanding economies of East and South East Asia, as well as the Arab Gulf region (Graner and Gurung 2003). It is this recent phenomenon that has awakened interest from researchers about the impact of migration and remittances on the Nepali economy. This section will focus on the history of Nepali migration, and the political events that have helped shape migration from this country.

During the early 18th century the central Himalayan region was divided among several small kingdoms. Towards the latter half of the 18th century, the kingdom of Gorkha, a relatively poor one, began expanding under the leadership of King Prithvinarayan Shah and in seven years annexed territories five hundred times larger than itself (Onta and Tamang 2014:287). It was after this period of expansion that Nepal had its first institutionalized experience with out-migration.

Nepali men developed a reputation abroad as reliable workers because of their role in the British *Gurkha* army. It was after the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816 that the British "discovered" the *Gurkhas* (Pemble 1971). In the aftermath of this war, the Treaty of Sagauli was ratified, through which Nepal's size was reduced to more or less its current territory (Onta and Tamang 2014). The war marked the end of the Nepali expansionist period. However, this war gave Nepali soldiers a good reputation among the British. Their reputation for endurance and reliability has continued until today. Many international companies want Nepali people to work for them, because Nepalis are considered to be hard working and trustworthy. Regardless of the veracity of these perceptions, they create a favorable market for Nepalis to obtain jobs abroad.

Working for the East India Company, however, was not the only way in which Nepalis were employed in India. After the end of British colonial rule, Nepalis continued to descend from the hills into the Indian plains for seasonal employment. Low skilled Nepali migration into India was, until very recently, the preferred form of migration. Nepalis are employed in the private sector as security guards, domestic workers, and manual laborers in mines, tea plantations, and dairy farms (Sharma and Thapa 2013). The

movement of people between India and Nepal became increasingly popular after the 1950 "Treaty of Peace and Friendship" between the two countries. The treaty allowed for faster and simpler travel across the border, while at the same time making it difficult to estimate the exact number of Nepalis working in India. Estimates differ widely, ranging from a few hundred thousand to a few million (Kollmair et al. 2006, World Bank 2011). The difficulty of accurately estimating the number of Nepalis in India is due to the high mobility of Nepali workers, the prevalence of cross-border marriages, the significant population of Indians with historical roots in Nepal, and the many Nepalis who have managed to gain domiciled status in India without it being recorded in either country (Sharma and Thapa 2013).

Nepalis working in India contribute substantially to the subsistence of their families back home (Sharma and Thapa 2013). Migration to India has generally been considered, erroneously, a hill phenomenon, disregarding the movement of people from Nepal's Tarai into India (Sharma and Thapa 2013). The fact that many people from Nepal's Tarai, including ethnic groups such as the Tharu and a large number of Madhesis<sup>2</sup>, also go to India for work is largely ignored not just in the migration literature but also by the public (Sharma and Thapa 2013). According to the 2001 CBS report, of the total 589,050 Nepali absentees in India, 168,756 were from the Tarai region (CBS 2001). It has been argued that one reason why migrants from the Tarai become invisible in India is the cultural and linguistic similarities they share with inhabitants of north India (Neupane 2005). Cultural and linguistic boundaries become fluid around the physical

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<sup>2</sup> Groups of people who came to Nepal from Northern India several generations ago. Tharus, who identify as an indigenous group, do not consider themselves to be Madhesis.

India-Nepal border. In Pipariya, the movement of people across the border is a common practice.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nepal's politics oscillated between autocracy and democracy, affecting the way in which the population migrated, as well as how the government perceived migration. In 1951, the 104-year-old autocratic Rana oligarchy was overthrown, opening Nepal's doors to modernization. Through mediation by Jawarharlal Nehru —then Indian Prime Minister— the Rana rulers reached an agreement with King Tribhuvan Shah and the political party Nepali Congress (NC), agreeing to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly. The Shah dynasty emerged from the simple figurehead position it had been holding since 1846, and regained control. In 1959 the first parliamentary elections were held. However, this experiment with democracy was short-lived and in 1960 King Tribhuvan's son, Mahendra Shah, dismissed the democratic government and set up a party-less centralized framework known as the *Panchayat*—or "council of elders"—system.

The Rana, holding a tight grip on Nepal's population, did not promote institutions that could awaken political freedom in the population—such as modern schools, libraries and media outlets (Onta and Tamang 2014:287). By the end of their regime, there were few modern schools in the country, and only the elite had access to education. Nepal's population consisted mainly of uneducated peasants, and adult literacy rate was only 5% in 1951 (Parajuli and Das 2013). The lack of democratized development of the educational system during the first part of the 20th century set Nepal behind, and the

country's adult literacy rate according to UNESCO was 64.7% in 2011. This contributes to the stagnant economy, and accelerates labor migration.

The end of the Rana regime signified an opening of the Nepali economy and a slow movement towards the modernization of the country's institutions and infrastructure. At the same time, Nepal's foreign aid dependency deepened. Unable to reach the levels of educational, institutional and infrastructural development of the rest of the world, or even the region, the government trusted most of the country's development to foreign aid donors. The state managed to ensure involvement of many international donor agencies in the country's development projects and thereby negotiate for the continued flow of foreign aid (Shrestha 2001:19). Foreign aid was also directed to try to solve the employment issue. Gaige (1975:200) states that [foreign] aid assisted the monarchy both directly and indirectly to create a better-equipped and better-trained army and to put a large number of potentially restive young men on the bureaucratic payrolls. The problem of employment is a recurring one in the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the country.

Development and foreign aid, however, created dependency without really addressing any of Nepal's institutional flaws. The national economy did not expand outside of the agriculture sector, which itself remained largely underdeveloped. Even today, 70% of Nepal's population subsists on agriculture. This economic reality was aggravated by insufficient jobs outside of the agrarian sector to employ the rapidly growing young population. Many young people, therefore, are pushed to look for employment outside of Nepal.

Migration to India was the prevalent form of migration until the 1980s, when the appearance of the rapidly developing economies of West, East and South East Asia, driven by the oil boom of the 1970s, created thousands of jobs in the construction and industrial sector. These economies turned to the huge masses of low skilled South and South East Asian workers for labor supply. Nepal's case is not unique, as many other countries in the region like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines are also involved in this labor practice. Because of its lower costs, migration from Nepal to India is still common and significant as many Nepalis still cannot afford to go to the new, more popular destinations of the Gulf countries and Malaysia (Sharma and Thapa 2013). However, people who are able to pay for the costs of overseas migration prefer doing this, mostly due to the higher rate of remittances this kind of migration enables.

The opportunities created by the development of these large Asian economies moved the Nepali government to promote the Foreign Employment Act of 1985. The Act specifies the countries to which Nepali citizens are encouraged to migrate. The Act also opened avenues for the private sector to facilitate foreign employment (DOFE Report 2014). This allowed for the establishment of labor recruiting agencies throughout the Kathmandu valley, as well as in other parts of Nepal, which work with employer companies from Gulf countries to facilitate the process of sending Nepalis abroad.

The country remained a centralized monarchy until 1990, when the first *Jana Andolan* or "People's Movement" forced the monarchy to restore multiparty democracy. A new Constitution limited the role of the monarchy—although it did not abolish it—granting political and civil rights to the population. In 1991 elections were held, and the

democratically elected government embarked on a journey of economic liberalization and made official moves to a market economy, which also encouraged out-migration (DOFE Report 2014). During this period of economic liberalization, more and more Nepali people began to look for job opportunities in the larger Asian economies. This kind of migration is relatively short-term and circular, as most men are hired on two to three year contracts. At the end of the contract, the workers are given the option to continue working for the company or return to their home countries.

The earliest record of labor permits issued by the Government shows that 3,605 Nepalis left for foreign employment in 1993/94, primarily to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (DOFE Report 2014). At the same time, although Nepalis had always been involved in different kinds of migration, the large number of people leaving after the 1990s liberalization of the economy is unprecedented. According to the Department of Foreign Labor, a total of 27,796 labor permits were issued in 1999/2000, and the 2001 National Population Census detected a decrease in Nepali migrants to India, declining from 89.2% of total emigrants in 1991 to 77.3% in 2001 (Kansakar 2003). Since 2001, more than 100,000 labor permits have been issued each year, and the population census shows a sharp increase in the percentage of Nepalis abroad, from 3.2% in 2001 to 7.3% in 2011 (CBS 2011).

From 1996 to 2006 Nepal suffered from civil unrest, generated by a Maoist insurrection, which created political turmoil and further affected employment possibilities within the country. The intensification of the conflict during the early 2000s coincides with the intensification of labor migration as stated in the paragraph above. While the



violence affected mainly the areas of Western Nepal, during the early 2000s the Chitwan district also saw an increase in violence. In Pipariya, the first men who decided to migrate to the Gulf did so around 2002 and 2003. Interviewing these first migrants, I noticed they all mentioned the Maoist conflict and the lack of job opportunities at home, as well as the imminent threat of being coopted by Maoist forces, as the main push in the decision to migrate.

As more and more Nepalis left the country, the government decided to improve its policy on migration. In 2007, the Foreign Employment Act was updated in an attempt to regulate the activities of recruitment agencies, and to improve the conditions of Nepali workers abroad. This further regulated the procedures that should be followed by manpower agencies to receive accreditation. It also delimited the steps that both agencies and migrants should follow to legally migrate outside of Nepal. The main aim of the Act is to "make foreign employment business safe, managed and decent and protect the rights and interests of the workers who go for foreign employment" (Foreign Employment Act 2007:1). There are around 700 active manpower agencies all over the Kathmandu valley, and many smaller agents work in areas outside of Nepal's capital. An estimated 90% of the people leaving Nepal for employment reasons do so through these agencies<sup>3</sup>. Because these agencies administer job opportunities and are in contact with the companies searching for workers, they are largely responsible for the experiences Nepalis have abroad. Unfortunately, there is also room for corruption and fraud in the way agencies are run.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC) on November 15, 2014.

The 2007 Act is partially an acknowledgment by the Nepali government of its own inability to employ the rapidly expanding young population. Scholars have argued against the risks of relying on migration as the main source of economic development for a country. Shrestha (2001) criticizes migration as a capitalist enterprise that adds a burden to the domestic economy. He quotes Meillasoux stating that "the propagation of semi-proletariat circular migration was beneficial for the capitalist sector, but costly for the domestic economy. While this type of migration allowed the capitalist sector to take full advantage of migrants during their most productive years, it did not have to bear the costs of raising them through their non or least productive boyhood and supporting them during the old age. Such tasks and costs were assigned to domestic (peripheral) economies which derived little benefit from their adult migrants" (Shrestha 2001:54). I would disagree that, in the case of Nepal, migration stops the national economy from benefiting from its adult migrants, as given the lack of domestic employment, the remittances that adult migrants are able to send turns a person that would otherwise be unemployed—and economically unproductive—into an income generator. Unfortunately, as Shrestha indicates, migration generates a vicious cycle in which the most productive part of the labor force, which might have the will and strength to improve the national economy, leave the country, creating a demographic vacuum. Migration does provide a momentary solution to employment issues, but cannot ensure solutions of other structural problems of the state.

Nepal's current political situation has also been detrimental to the development of a stronger national economy. The April and May 2015 earthquake were major setbacks for the development of infrastructure in Nepal, generating a humanitarian crisis in several

parts of the country. At the same time, the promulgation of a constitution in the aftermath of the earthquake fuelled disagreements among marginalized groups, mainly the Madeshi, but also the Tharu. A natural disaster, as well as the lack of a constitution that is equally legitimized by the government and by most sectors of the population, add to the unstable political situation in the country, and probably push more young people to leave Nepal in search of employment.

The Nepali state has been unable to generate employment within its borders to maintain its increasingly large young population at home. Labor migration, as a regulated and state-legitimized initiative, became an alternative way for the State to ensure employment to the youth, without needing to create employment opportunities at home. In a largely agrarian country, but where agriculture is not sufficient given the small amount of arable land available and the rapidly increasing population, migration is perceived by young men, such as the members of the Brotherhood of the Returned, and their families, as the only reliable economic alternative.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical approaches**

### **Part 1: Remittances — from a global and a localized perspective**

#### *Macro-level approaches to remittances*

While changes take place socially and politically in Nepal, and the people of Pipariya become part of international migratory trends, migration scholars attempt to shed light on how remittances are conceptualized by the state and international multilateral agencies. The literature on migration is broad and contradictory, ranging from extreme opponents to a migration-based economy, to those who understand migration as an economic strategy. Economists, political scientists and sociologists have focused on the impact of migration and remittances on the national economy, as well as on policy recommendations for national and international organizations. Macroeconomic analysis of remittances allow for an understanding of the big picture—where migrants fit in the narrative of international development, and the government's interests in promoting migration.

Building on some of the points expressed by Shrestha (2001) in the previous chapter, Taylor (1999) states that international labor migration represents a loss of human resources for migrant sending areas. This situation is reverted by remittances, as they represent the largest direct positive impact of migration on migrant sending areas (Taylor 1999:67). Remittances, as the economic outcome of migration, reinsert the migrant in the local economy, despite the physical distance.

Some scholars have a cautionary approach to remittances. De Haas (2005) writes that ‘remittance euphoria’ is not justified, because of unattractive investment environments and restrictive immigration policies which interrupt circular migration patterns and prevent the high development potential of migration from being fully realized (de Haas 2005:1269). This is relatively true in the case of Nepal, where most of the country's population is still rural, and where agriculture has been for many decades the largest sector of the economy, only recently being replaced by the service industry.

Remittances could promote Dutch disease<sup>4</sup> effects in Nepal, without really promoting long-term investment in the country (Sapkota 2013). At the same time, Sapkota recognizes that remittances have become a strong source of income for the country and it is impossible to imagine a functioning Nepali economy without them. Therefore, it is necessary to accept them as a temporary resource, without considering remittances as a substitute to formulating and implementing growth and jobs creating policy reforms (Sapkota 2013). For a country like Nepal, where remittances are over 25% of the GDP, relying on remittances could be as dangerous as having a highly specialized economy that mainly depends on the ability of Nepali migrants to find work abroad. However, the strongly agrarian nature of the Nepali economy, with traditional, non-commercial practices, acts as a limiting factor for the expansion of internal growth.

As remittances keep increasing in their volume, they become key factors in promoting development of rural economies. It is impossible to separate migration from rural livelihoods and agriculture in Nepal. In 2010, the CIA Factbook estimated that 69%

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<sup>4</sup> Economic term relating the increase in the economic development of a specific sector, with the decline of other sectors.

of Nepal's population was employed in agriculture, activity that in 2015 provided 31.7% of the country's GDP (CIA Factbook 2016). The country's amount of arable land, however, is only 20% given its mountainous terrain. The lack of economic improvement opportunities offered by the agrarian sector, and the underdevelopment of other economic sectors such as services and industries are the main push for young people from rural areas to migrate. This is a reality of Nepal, as well as of other rural economies in the world. Rigg (2006:180) states that lives and livelihoods in the rural South are becoming increasingly divorced from farming and, therefore, from the land. Migration is seen as a key element in deagrarianization (Sunam and McCarthy 2016).

In order for Nepal to fully realize the potential of migration, national and international migratory policies need to be more accepting of migration and remittances. There have been suggestions of progressive approaches to migratory policies, advocating for opening borders as a way to enhance the developmental potential of labor migration (de Haas, 2005:1281). As Ellis states, the adverse experience of being a migrant is in part created by public stances and policies, both internally and internationally (2003). Mobile populations get minimal attention in strategic thinking, and, if anything, they remain under an official cloud, determined by the policy stances taken on them many years ago. At the same time, the economies that receive migrants need to become more accountable for the well-being and the humanity of these workers. Migrants are citizens to whom civil rights apply whether they are in transit or living in a new destination: rights to personal security and rights of access to social services and facilities. Considerable scope exists for improving the policy environment that discharges such rights, and in formulating new modalities for the protection and support of migrants (Rogaly & Rafique 2003).

International organizations have voiced their concerns over the poor working condition of migrant workers, and the vulnerable situations they are exposed to, prone to exploitation and trafficking (Amnesty International 2015, World Bank Group 2015, HRW 2016). Shrestha (2008) believes that there is not enough information given to migrants about the labor conditions they will face outside of Nepal. Migrants are not properly trained, and are not aware of how to defend themselves from unsafe labor environments. Shrestha also considers that the government should play a larger role in regulating migration by adhering to a policy of economic diplomacy (2008:13). This position is conflicting, as it considers remittances vital for the stagnant Nepali economy of today, while at the same time determines necessary an intervention that will ensure migrant workers are safe and capable of maximizing their capacity for sending remittances back to Nepal.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations are working to improve migrants' awareness, while at the same time migrants are taking care of each other. Thieme and Wyss (2005) consider in their study of the village of Sainik Basti that migrant workers and families have a specialized knowledge of what it means to migrate. Considering migrants purely as vulnerable removes the agency from them. It leads to the belief that migrants are unaware of risks and are tricked into working abroad. This is not always true. Nepali people are fully aware of the risks involved in migrating and working for companies in the Gulf and Malaysia, and they decide to do it regardless. The government has also developed awareness programs that work under the premise that migrants are unaware and uninformed, and should be better equipped to deal with the risks of migration.

As Gamburd (2000:235) states, "instead of taking these negative assumptions for granted, social scientists must carefully examine how the relationships, travels and transactions in question actually benefit and hurt those involved, critically accounting for the power of images and horror stories to affect scholarly and general conceptions of migration". These negative assumptions are dangerous because they impact the way in which migrants perceive themselves, and their own capacity to advocate for themselves in front of their employers. A board Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC), a Nepali NGO organized by returned migrants with the aim of empowering Nepali workers abroad, told me in an interview that many Nepalis do not access the few benefits that the government provides because they are unaware of their rights as workers. Unions are non-existent, particularly in the Gulf countries. However, this does not mean that Nepali labor migrants have always been unsuccessful in defending their own rights. Sandeep, a young man from Pipariya who returned from Dubai after being there for only eight days, told me that he initially accepted the job offer because it was advertised as inside a cement factory. When they arrived to Dubai, however, they realized they had to work outside, carrying cement bags under the sun. The whole group, 38 Nepali migrant workers, protested against it and managed to get their passports back and safely return to Nepal. Sandeep then decided to migrate again, this time to Malaysia, where he worked as a machine operator for five years.

In order to ensure safety and to maximize the sacrifices individual migrants make, population mobility needs to be part of poverty reduction policies as an opportunity and a benefit, not a detriment (Ellis 2003). Migrants contribute to development both in origin and destination areas. They display initiative just by the act of



migrating. Good ideas get carried from one place to another by migrants, who can also provide technological advances in their home communities, pointing out outmoded technical practices that they have seen replaced by others in the countries where they have traveled. The impact of migration goes beyond the economic, having the power to alter social structures within the left behind community.

### *Localized approaches to remittances—the stay-behind people*

In this ethnography I focus mainly on the impact migration has on the stay-behind community, centering the analysis on the household. While understanding the large-scale implications of migration and policy making is necessary, understanding migrants and their families motivations and reasons to engage in migration allows for a more holistic understanding of the localized impact of migration. Much of the research on migration is focused on the migrant experience; however, there has also been some attention paid to the left-behind family. The research of the migrants' families focuses mainly on two different topics: first, the use of remittances, and second, the changes in family structure as migrants leave their homes.

Mobility and international migration are not equally available to all Nepali families. The very poorest households tend to be tied to the village in various forms of debt bondage, which constrain their ability to seek work elsewhere for anything other than a short period (Seddon et al. 2002:20). Seddon's point implies that in order to be able to migrate, families need to have a certain amount of capital. Without initial capital, the movement of people is constrained. In the case described in this ethnography, Tharu people are positioned in the society in such a way that they can draw from their capital —

which is not the same for all Tharus— in order to migrate. Distinct migratory patterns will emerge depending on the amount of capital each family possesses, and chapter 4 will focus on these differences. Social class and economic status have a strong influence on the household's ability to make decisions.

The prospect of foreign employment is not enough for families to move out of agriculture completely. Remittances become, therefore, a contribution to the household income, complementing—and largely expanding—that household's traditional agrarian assets. As Seddon et al. (2002:21) affirm, non-farm income is becoming increasingly critical in determining the overall livelihood status of the household and its members. Rural Nepali families are not able to detach from agriculture completely and labor migration, as it is present in Nepal, is only a short-term activity that involves high risks. However, the lives of rural families should not be essentialized as mainly agricultural. According to Seddon, an overwhelming concentration on the role of agriculture has blinded researchers and policy-makers alike to the fact that the rural population of Nepal consists not of “farmers” but of individuals and households whose livelihoods are sustained by a wide variety of activities and income sources (Seddon et al. 2002).

While some families opt for investment, other families spend remittances on consumer goods (food, houses, consumer durables). Investing in assets would give rise to improved livelihoods in the future, while the expenditure on consumer goods only allows for temporary perceived benefits from the money. This decision is criticized by development agencies (World Bank 2011), and government agencies (DOFE Report 2014) equally; however, certain financial decisions praised in the developed world do not

make sense in other parts of the world—partially because of lack of incentive to invest. These discrepancies between migrant households' behaviors and policy makers are generated around misunderstandings about life towards the bottom of world income distributions (Ellis 2003).

Gender is as important as social class in determining access to migration and remittances. In Nepal, only 5.6% of total migrant workers are females (DOFE 2014). Strict regulations on the migration of women, and limitations on destinations female workers could apply for contributed to this gender difference of labor migrants. At the same time, the number of women migrating for labor has been rising, with an increase of 239% in the last seven years (DOFE 2014). Different accessibility in terms of gender implies that women represent the largest stay-behind demographic, and any analysis of the impact of remittances in the receiving communities should address the issue of women. In the particular case of Nepal, few scholars have focused on studying the family rather than the migrant. Shrestha and Conway (2001), Kaspar (2005), Maharjan et al. (2012), and Adhikari and Hobley (2015) present very interesting views of how the family reorganizes itself as the migrant leaves. They all assess the roles and responsibilities of stay behind women, and how female roles change in the context of Nepali migration.

There are certain cross-cultural similarities that can help us better understand the complexity of people's movements and the greater impact migration has in the community where migrants come from. From some authors' perspective, male migration leads to changes in the gender division of labor, which, in turn, leads to greater women's mobility, autonomy, and overall empowerment by providing new fill roles, skills,

opportunities, and decision-making powers over the use of resources (Connell 1984; Bever 2002; Chant and Craske 2003; Quisumbing 2003). After the male figure leaves the household, women have new opportunities to navigate their traditional roles and responsibilities. Sadiqi and Ennaji (2004) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) suggest that male migration helps increasing women's autonomy and self-esteem by expanding their role and responsibilities in the household beyond the traditional ones. The gendered impact of migration does not exclusively affect women; in her study of female migrant workers in Sri Lanka, Gamburd (2000) describes the involvement of women with employment outside of the household, and outside of the village, and the transformations it has generated in traditional village and family structures. Gender roles and responsibilities are culturally situated, and ethnographic studies allow us to perceive the particular changes each community experiences.

The impact of migration on women within Nepal depends on the position of women in society (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). Because patrilocality is practiced throughout Nepal, after the husband's migration women find themselves relatively isolated in their in-laws' household. It takes several years for a new daughter-in-law to be able to enjoy certain privileges—such as a reduced workload—and it is generally after the birth of their first son that women begin to be more accepted by senior women in their husband's household (Bennett 1983). Because the situation of women is so delicate in Nepal, and migration is such a crucial activity for many Nepali households, we would expect the role of migrant's wives—and also mothers—to be better depicted in Nepal and migration studies. However, as Shrestha and Conway (2001) express it, migrants' wives

exist in the shadow—in the shadow of their husbands, in the shadow of the mountains, and in the shadow of the academic discourse on migration.

Maharjan et al. (2012) suggest that migration has helped women broaden and deepen their involvement in rural society as a result of male out-migration, which could lead to either the empowerment or disempowerment of women, depending on the migration pattern and remittances received by the household. Larger remittances generally help reduce the physical work burden and increase decision-making roles, thus empowering the women left behind. Where women are able to manage the remittance money and employ workers to help in the field, they are able to substitute for the work their husbands would be doing at home (Maharjan et al. 2012). Even if the type of labor does not change for a migrant's wife, the intensity clearly does. Women generally work more during migration because they have to shoulder most of their husbands' duties in addition to the usual workload (Kaspar 2005). However, low remittances have the opposite impact, and saddle women with a greater physical workload (Maharjan et al. 2012). Many migrants need to take loans in order to pay for the costs of migration, and if remittances are not enough to help pay the loan back, women are not only responsible for the increased household work, they also need to find the money to cover loan expenses. Therefore, the amount of remittances that the migrant makes abroad has great impact on the stay behind family.

Because remittances are important, the person entitled to receive the money becomes important within the household too. In some households, it is the migrant's wife who receives remittances. That is when we perceive the changes in workload described

before. In some of these cases, their communities can pressure them for money and help because of a belief that their husbands are sending them sufficient remittances (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). In other cases, especially in joint households, other male members of the household, or the migrant's mother, are the ones entitled to remittances. In this case, wives of migrant husbands become economically dependent on their relatives who received the remittances, and thus women lose overall control over the resources (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). Where households had recently split from the joint household there can be signs of tensions when the wife receives all the remittance and makes decisions about its use for the sole benefit of her nuclear household (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). Overall, women may find that their relationships with male relatives and with other women in their networks worsen because of tensions after their husbands migrate (Adhikari and Hobley 2015), tensions that are largely based on the entitlement to remittances.

Women's decision-making power seems to be largely affected by remittances, and by the absence of the male figure in the household. Research in the hills of Nepal shows that women have a greater role in operational decisions such as those about crop and variety selection, and a lesser one in strategic decisions such as about nonfarm investments (Maharjan et al. 2012). However, this empowerment is only temporary. Although the women take on more decision-making power during their husbands' absence, it is often assumed that the migration will be temporary and the husband will resume his role upon return (Kaspar 2005). Regardless of the absence of their husbands, women are still unable to make decisions regarding certain specific aspects of domestic life. Women still depend on their husbands or older male kin member to make big

household decisions such as land purchase, construction of new buildings or improvement of existing ones, purchase of large livestock and selecting the school their children will attend (Adhikari and Hogel 2015). The limited role of women in nonfarm investment can be attributed to traditional gender discrimination, where women are raised to follow decisions, not to make them (Maharjan et al. 2012). It is clear that women become de facto household heads although their husbands remain the formal household heads (Kaspar 2005).

While some of these changes, which affect mainly women, are a direct response to male out-migration, some changes are partially or not at all connected to migration. The changes in the rural division of labor seem to be one of them. The traditional gender division of labor in agriculture is weakening and the feminization of agriculture<sup>5</sup>, already prevalent in Nepal, is on the rise. However, no significant difference is seen between migrant and non-migrant households in this aspect (Maharjan et al. 2012). Although it is clear that changes are happening in the Nepali society, and that migration is partially responsible for them, it is also important to study which cultural spaces are directly affected by remittances and migrations, and which spaces are changing due to the country's development and post-conflict economic stabilization.

Studies conducted in Nepal recognize the importance of migration as a way to improve household livelihood. This happens in the context of increased population pressure on resources, decline in resource base, and the need to consume modern amenities to express modernity through the generation of additional cash income

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<sup>5</sup> Feminization of agriculture refers to the increase of women's participation in the agricultural sector, particularly in the developing world.

(Macfarlane 1976; Adhikari 1996; Bishop 1998; Adhikari and Hobley 2015). It seems likely that migration will continue happening, and more and more Nepali households will become engaged in this kind of economic activity. There is, therefore, an urgent need to consider the changes in gender roles in the context of male out-migration in the economic development policies and strategies of Nepal (Maharjan et al. 2012). As international migration is a widespread livelihood strategy and will not cease in the near future, the key development issue is to reduce the social and economic costs of migration and increase its returns for the migrants and those remaining at home (Thieme and Wyss 2005:89).

## **Part 2: Theoretical approaches to people's movements**

There are several different approaches to the study of migration and remittances. Because these are mainly economic activities, it is in the field of economics where we see a great array of theoretical frameworks develop. However, sociology and anthropology have also contributed to these frameworks. To be able to send money home is the main motivation for migration, and that is why understanding remittances first is important. The two most important approaches to the study of remittances, which clearly connect to the movement of Pipariya's Tharus, lie within the realm of the New Economics of Labor Migration — a joint venture between economics and sociology to explain household behaviors — and the realm of anthropological gift theory.

Remittances and migration not only produce changes in the economic status of migrants and their families. They also have a great impact on the social relationships of migrants. To account for the social aspect of migration, I will make use of “Social Capital Theory” developed initially by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1973 study of Algerian migrant



workers, and expanded later on by several sociologists and anthropologists. Any approach to the study of remittances and migration that is purely economic or purely social is limited, and it is only by combining ideas from different fields —economics, sociology and anthropology— that we achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons for and the consequences of labor migration.

### ***Remittances as livelihood strategies***

The approach developed by the New Economics of Labor Migration was originally a response to the argument of classical economists that remittances were an altruistic behavior of the migrant. Classical economy considers people's behaviors to be "rational" by making economic sense and profit. Part of this theory focuses on the "happiness" that an individual receives from a monetary transaction. In order to quantify happiness, classical economy uses the concept of "marginal utility", which are the units of happiness, or gains or losses of consuming a good or service (Mankiw 2007). Classical economy makes sense of remittances by stating that the marginal utility of a migrant is equal to the marginal utility of the family that receives the remittances when that remittance money is spent (Agarwal and Horowitz 2002). It is considered to be altruistic because it is as if the migrant was giving up their own utility in favor of their family's happiness. The destination for migration is determined by the geographic differences in labor supply and demand, as places where job opportunities and income are greater than the cost of migration —that cost being the removal of a working pair of hands from the originating household, or the literal cost of relocating for work. Migrants generally maximize utility by moving to wherever the expected gains from their labor are greatest (Todaro and Maruszko 1987).

This kind of analysis, however, fails to account for the social aspect of remittances: the fact that individuals are sending their money not to any random group, but to one of which they consider themselves part. This is the gap that the New Economics of Labor Migration tries to assess, with the development of “livelihood strategies” and their improvement as motivations for migration.

When looking at migration and remittances as livelihood strategies, it is important to understand the origins of this theory. It developed from Amartya Sen's work on food security and famine. In this approach, resources are referred to as ‘assets’ or ‘capitals’ and are often categorized between five or more different asset types owned or accessed by family members: human capital (skills, education, health), physical capital (produced investment goods), financial capital (money, savings, loan access), natural capital (land, water, trees etc.), and social capital (networks and associations). Even people living in extreme poverty have access to these different assets (Sen 1981). This concept is radical in that it does not consider poverty as uniquely an extreme experience. It acknowledges that there are different kinds of poverty, and that almost every household, regardless of how poor they are in absolute terms, have access to certain kinds of capital. For this framework, poverty and migration are intertwined to the point where one justifies the existence of the other.

The British sociologist Frank Ellis expands Sen’s theory and develops the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). In this theory, migration is understood as a spatial separation between the location of a resident household or family, and one or more livelihood activities engaged in by family members (Ellis 2003). It is a central

feature of the livelihoods of the majority of households in low-income countries. The income of the migrant abroad cannot be separated from the assets of the family in the place of origin.

While considering livelihood assets allows us to consider the agency of low income migrating households in their economic development, it is important to understand to what extent poverty is the motivation for migration. In his analysis on the New Economics of Labor Migration, Stark Oded (1991) argues that "[...] the decision by households to send migrants to foreign labor markets is influenced by their initial perceived relative deprivation within the reference group". The reference group is understood as that group within society that has a higher economic advantage. It is in relationship to these higher income groups that lower income households compare themselves. Social disparities, therefore, play an important role in the motivations to migrate, and should not be overlooked in the study of remittances.

The SLA theory focuses strongly on how the lives of rural populations are affected by either internal or international migration. With respect to assets in rural areas in particular, remittances from migration can strengthen livelihoods by allowing for investment in agrarian activities such as land, labor, pesticides, and machinery. Remittances can also allow for investments outside of agriculture. These mainly focus on investment in education, resulting in better prospects for the next generation, and investment in assets permitting local non-farm income to be generated. Remittances allow for a diversification of the household's economy. At the same time, remittances benefit the village economy as a whole, as there is new capital circulating in it. People are

able to buy more goods of daily use, and the construction sector also develops, as more families improve their housing conditions. All these relatively "short-term" investments as well as some more permanent ones, activate the local economy to an extent that traditional agrarian markets are not able to.

Although, as we have seen, there are several benefits to understanding migration in terms of livelihood assets, there are also limitations. The concept of household strategies is only relevant in the case of relatively poor, rural households; it does not explain migration and remittances in the case of those living in abject poverty, or in the case of the higher strata of the society —or reference group, as Stark labels them (1991:174). In the case of abject poverty, it should be noted that the livelihood assets model believes that it is necessary to have a certain amount of capital to make migration possible in the first place, especially considering that leaving for a different country is a costly enterprise. For people from a higher economic status, migration is a different experience because of ease of accessibility and relocation in a new place. The concept of remitting is also different because the money can be directed to causes other than helping the household meet ends. Therefore, this framework becomes relevant depending on the kind of population whose remittance and migration patterns we are interested in studying.

### ***Remittances as gift***

Anthropological gift theory allows us to understand remittances from a cultural perspective. In his essay "The Gift" (1925), the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss defines the obligations of gift giving: the obligation to give gifts (by giving, one shows oneself as generous, and thus as deserving of respect), the obligation to receive them (by

receiving the gift, one shows respect to the giver), and the obligation to return the gift (thus demonstrating that one's honor is equivalent to or more than that of the original giver). Gift giving is embedded in morality, and giving, receiving and returning gifts create a moral bond between the persons exchanging gifts. At the same time, Mauss emphasizes the competitive and strategic aspect of gift giving: by giving more than one's competitors, one lays claim to greater respect than them (Polanyi 1944). Remittances are, from this perspective, a gift given to the household by the migrant member, reinforcing a social connection between the migrant and the household.

Remittances as gift come, from the perspective of this framework, in several shapes. They come in the form of money, mainly, but also in the form of things: from cloth to technology, there are several items that migrants send from abroad that constitute part of the capital they remit back to the household. In his introduction to the book *The Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai discusses the social value of commodities. He claims that all things have commodity potential, and commodities are part of an exchange that gives them "life" in social interactions (1986). By adding a social value to things, the focus shifts from Marx's production-dominated view of the commodity, into a total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption (Appadurai 1986). The analysis can be easily extended to all the things that migrants remit to their households. Remitting implies that the migrant is still strongly attached to the household, and considers it his or her priority to improve the livelihood of those back home. Therefore, there is a social value added to the money or the things the migrant is remitting, a value that moves that capital away from a purely economic transaction. It is not just utility that is being transferred; it is the maintenance of a social relationship.

Reciprocity, a crucial component of gift theory, is also present in the remittance exchange. In Mauss' original gift theory, reciprocity implied that the returned gift places the original receiver in an equal or even higher position than the original giver. In her critical approach to gift theory, Karen Sykes determines that how to assess why people become obligated to each other poses an enormous question (Sykes 2005). From her (and Mauss') perspective, people feel that the gift is a magical or spiritual aspect of human relations, an aspect that stands apart from other ways of keeping social associations. However, because the remittance transaction happens within the realm of the household, kinship relations affect the way in which reciprocity is played out. This idea, known as generalized reciprocity, implies that the motivation to remit belongs to the kind of reciprocity aimed at maintaining ties and good relationships between families and friends (Cronk 2012:164).

However, gift giving and generosity are not as unconditional as we would like to believe (Cronk 2012:164). Migrants remit to their families because they are interested in maintaining a social bond with them. Does the reward for migrating and remitting come from the way in which the personal status within the society changes after the migrant is able to send foreign money? Within the household, migrants acquire a stronger voice in the decision making process of the family. Hari, who worked in Malaysia for ten years, told me about how he asked his family to save most of the money he was remitting, and once he returned to Nepal he invested it in building a large, cement house. His family used part of the money to cover certain other expenses, such as his two children's school fees, and his mother's medical bills, but even from far away he was consulted, and his authority figure in the family strengthened. While these changes in the perception of

migrants are happening within the household, there are other social aspects that motivate people to migrate, aspects that fall outside of the realm of the family.

### *Remittances as social capital*

Remittances are the economic motivation to migrate, but there is also a social component that encourages young men to leave Pipariya. There is a specific social status attached to those who have left the village, and labor migrants are not excluded from this. The theories already proposed contribute to this idea of social capital of migration. The sustainable livelihoods approach, beyond the material inputs to migration, considers as inputs the social status of migration, and the individual experience of the migrant. They are associated with a higher social status because they are able to leave the home village and travel the world. This pushes young men and women to want to migrate because of the new acquired status migration will give them once they return to their homes. Therefore, while there is a family component to migration and a necessity to improve the household's livelihood, there are also personal reasons that might influence the decision of people to migrate, even in societies where kinship ties are considered more important than personal motivations.

In 1986 Pierre Bourdieu wrote an essay titled "Forms of Capital". In this essay he expanded on the notion of "capital" from a purely economic rationale into a more inclusive one. According to Bourdieu, there are other forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital, which are as important as economic capital in influencing the behavior of people and communities. Social capital is particularly relevant to migration and the networks migrants create in their movement from one place to another.

Social capital is formed by all the resources of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition —or in other words, membership in a group —which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu 1986). As young Tharu men become interested in migrating, they contact other people from their hometowns who have also migrated. A social tie to a current or former migrant constitutes a potential source of social capital because someone with migratory experience can provide information, resources, and assistance to lower the costs of movement. Migrant networks connect non migrants in places of origin to current migrants at places of destination and former migrants in home communities, thereby reducing the costs and increasing the expected benefits of migration (Bohra and Massey 2009). As we will see in the next chapter, when making decisions on where to migrate, most of these young Tharu men consult their older cousins and uncles, or neighbors, and rely on their contacts and information in order to secure a job abroad. Migration has a spiral effect, where one person migrating is able to increase the social capital available to other people in their home community interested in migrating to the same place.

The idea of social capital assumes that people will be more likely to migrate to areas where other people from their community have previously migrated. However, migratory experiences change over time, and as migrants learn more about the migration process itself, they also dare to engage in new processes or go to places where no other person from their community has been. As a result, migration-specific human capital tends to act as a substitute for social capital on subsequent trips. As migrants continue



moving, we would also expect other variables that were significant in determining a first trip to become less important in explaining repeat migration (Bohra and Massey 2009).

In terms of social capital, migration also has an impact on the stay-behind community, as migrants acquire knowledge abroad not only about migratory procedures, but also about foreign cultures and practices. Peggy Levitt (1998) conceptualizes "social remittances" as the local-level, migration driven form of cultural diffusion. Social remittances imply all the knowledge migrants bring with them upon their return from abroad. They are making sense of their experiences using the interpretive frames they bring with them (Levitt 1998) and in the process they transform the home society. Senders—Levitt's definition of migrants—adopt new ideas and practices while abroad, and at the same time filter out others. Recipients—the stay-behind family—include certain elements from the senders' experiences, while ignoring others. This exchange of foreign and local knowledge exercised by those who are part of or impacted by migration contributes in a localized way to a transnational system of cultural diffusion.

The theory behind migration and the social and economic impact of remittances pushes us to understand the world beyond the localized experience. Understanding the experiences within the community that motivate people to migrate is important. However, understanding the consequences of migration, especially the impact that remittances have on the social landscape of the stay-behind family, as well as the transfer of knowledge and culture between the home and the host society allows for a more complex and globally grounded definition of people's movements.

## Chapter 4: "There is nothing to do here, so we migrate"

Pipariya, the village where this study is located, is an ethnically mixed village of the Chitwan district. The population is mainly Tharu and Bahun, though there are people from other ethnic groups such as Newars and Gurungs, as well as service and untouchable castes. The different ethnic and caste groups engage in diverse economic activities. While Tharus are mainly farmers, and own some small shops in the village, Bahuns tend to participate more in commerce, and own most of the large enterprises around the village. In Pipariya in particular, Bahuns own the village's oil and rice mills, and the construction materials store. These two main ethnic and social groups inhabit relatively distinct areas of the village. The following map shows the distribution of houses in Pipariya by ethnicity.

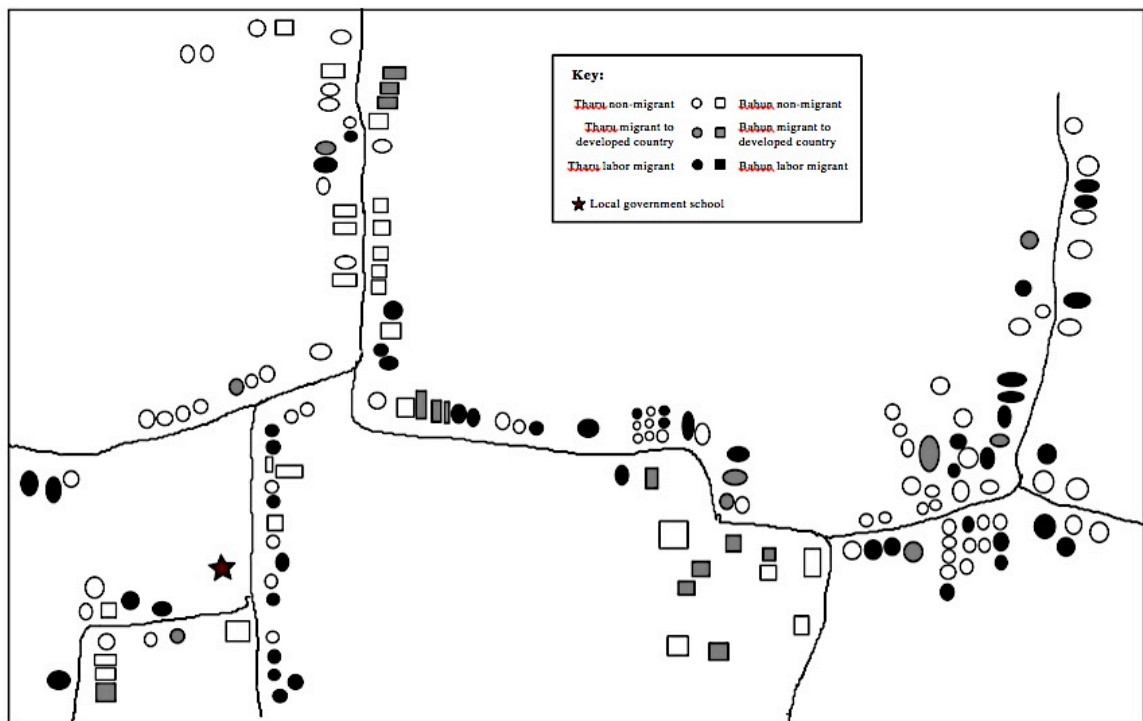


Figure 1: Map of Pipariya

Circle-shaped symbols represent Tharu households, while rectangle-shaped symbols represent Bahun families. Of a total of 171 houses, 127 are Tharu (around 73% of the village) and 37 Bahun (21% of the village). The rest of the 7 houses in the village belong to other caste or ethnic groups, and are not represented in the map. This map also shows which households currently have a member abroad, or have had one in the recent past. Black signals houses that have members working abroad, either in the Gulf countries or Malaysia, while the lighter shade of grey indicates houses that have members in Australia, Europe, or the United States. White indicates houses with no migrants.

The first and most astonishing fact is the number of households in the village that have at least one person abroad. A total of 71 houses (or 40% of all the houses in the village) have a migrant member. Of these 71 houses, 14 belong to Bahun families, and 57 are Tharu. Therefore, 80% of the migrant-sending households in Pipariya belong to the Tharu community.

The second interesting point emerges from the different patterns of migration between the two ethnic communities. Of the 57 Tharu households who have members abroad, 48 have people working in the Gulf countries or Malaysia. Only 9 have people who left Pipariya to study, and sometimes also work, in Australia, the United States, or Europe. All 14 Bahun households, instead, had a son who left Pipariya with a student visa to Australia. Bahun migration seems to follow a more linear path, where the parents pay for their son to get a bachelor's degree in Australia. After graduating they settle in the country and either keep sending money back to their parents, or are able to bring their

parents to Australia with them. Tharus, on the other hand, are mainly migrating for labor, and are therefore less likely to relocate abroad.

This analysis raises questions about the differences in opportunities that caste and ethnic groups have. Why is it that such a large number of households in Pipariya are sending people abroad? Why are Tharu people more likely to migrate for labor and Bahuns more likely to migrate for education? Because most Tharu households engage in labor migration to the Gulf and Malaysia, this chapter will focus on explaining this particular migratory experience. It will explore the above posed questions, describing the push and pull factors of migration for Tharu men, as well as the steps that they need to follow in order to work abroad.

### **Part 1: Reasons to leave home**

It is a warm winter afternoon, and Reeta and I are sitting together by the well. I have just finished doing laundry, and Reeta is washing her son's clothes. Reeta is a young, charming woman. She must be around 27 years old, and married into this household six years ago. Her husband has been working in Dubai since before they got married. He is only able to return to Nepal every two years, when he gets a two-month long vacation. In the six years they have been married, Reeta and her husband have lived together only for about six months.

I have been meaning to ask Reeta about a particular event, but it never seems to be the right time. What I am interested in knowing is what relatives do for the migrant workers on the day they leave. Is there a special *pooja*—worship ceremony—to celebrate

the departure of the migrant? Does the family give the migrant red *tika*<sup>6</sup> to wish him a safe travel? I start asking Reeta a few questions about her husband to find out. Talking to Reeta about her husband is always a complicated topic, as it makes her feel melancholic and sometimes causes her to stop talking at all. After a few questions about his next visit to Nepal, and how long he would stay, I finally ask her: what do you do for your husband on the day he has to leave? Does the family prepare anything for him?

She quietly responds: "Well, when a person is leaving for a trip, what the family does is that they fill two vases with water, and place them in the floor by the door. Then the man who is leaving goes out from that door, and his father and mother give him *tika*. Then other relatives prepare garlands and hang it from his neck, and people cry and then the man leaves". I noted the impersonal way she told the story, without mentioning her husband, talking in general terms about all the people who leave. Then she added "But I never do it." I ask her: "do you never cry, or do you never prepare the *pooja* for your husband?" "Of course I cry, a little bit!" she says "but I never give my husband *tika*". "Why not?" I wonder. At this point Reeta gives me a glance that indicates I should know better than to ask that question, a look she often gives me when I have been inquiring too much. She answers, nonetheless: "How many times has he come and gone, even before I came to this house? He doesn't like it, so we just don't do it".

I hoped my conversation with Reeta would give me a better picture of what kind of rituals families perform for their loved ones before they migrate. But it did more than that. Talking to Reeta I understood how common it has become for Pipariya's young men

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<sup>6</sup> A mixture of uncooked rice grains, yogurt and red powder placed on the forehead of someone in special or religious occasions, or as an expression of honor.

to leave, common to the point that no rituals or special celebration is needed when the migrant has already left several times. This, of course, varies from family to family, but the fact that certain families do not celebrate their migrants as they leave, indicates that to a certain extent, people in Pipariya and the migrants themselves are used to coming and going, without considering it a special event anymore. My next concern, then, was trying to understand what is it about the socio-economic opportunities in Pipariya that push young Tharu men to migrate.

In the dry months of winter, there is less work to do in the fields and the people of Pipariya have more free time. Women wake up early in the morning, tend to the animals and the kitchen gardens, and prepare the morning meal. The pace of the day then slows down, and women have time to wash clothes like Reeta and I do, lay grains to dry under the shy winter sun, and converse with each other, until the sun begins to set and it is time to prepare the evening meal. Men also have little to do after eating the morning meal. As the sun begins to disperse the morning fog, one by one the men of Pipariya, old and young, head down to the creek, where they set up mats and pull out a few decks of cards. They spend most of the day playing different card games, sometimes including poker, a newly acquired ability brought from abroad by some of the returned migrants. They head back home right before sunset. This is a daily ritual, just like that of the Brotherhood of the Returned, the young men I introduced before.

Dipendra, a young man of 25 years who lives next to the house where I am staying, stops sometimes on his way to the creek to talk to me. His task is to carry and store the decks of cards used by the men to play games. He worked as a cook in Saudi

Arabia for five years, but recently returned to Pipariya because he did not think he was making enough money abroad. Towards the end of my second stay in Pipariya, he agrees to be my informant. He can tell stories in the most entertaining way, and I thought he could provide me with some good and funny examples of what Tharu men experience abroad. As a hotel cook, he tells stories of learning how to speak Arabic while preparing a soccer court and organizing a small team with other hotel workers and supervisors. He also talks about cooking the most refined meat for the feasts of Saudi Arabian sheiks; meat that he did not even know which animal it came from. During the night, he used to spend time with other hotel workers, coming up with different combinations of fruits and nuts to make home-made alcohol, a risky move in a country where alcohol consumption is strictly prohibited.

During our interview, he told me he was waiting for a confirmation to go work in South Africa. "I am looking forward to going back abroad", he said. "Here, my only occupation is to open the casino [he laughs]. When I am abroad I have work and I am busy doing things". I asked him why does he not try to find a job near Pipariya. "The pay will never be the same", he said. "And here there are few jobs, I may work one month but the next one I never know." Dipendra's situation is not unique. Many young people struggle to find jobs outside of their families' fields, and when they do, they are paid meager salaries.

Pipariya and the villages near it have a unique economic situation because of their proximity to the Chitwan National Park. The national park is one of Nepal's most famous tourist attractions, and a large tourism industry has developed around it. The household in

which I stayed while I conducted my research is located near the Tharu Cultural Museum, a local initiative to open the doors of Tharu culture to the tourists who visit the area. The compound of houses is also opened to tourists, who can arrange the visit at one of the tourism centers near the park and come in with a Tharu guide who explains to them aspects of traditional village lifestyle. The interaction between the tourists and the household members, however, is limited probably due to language barriers, and these “Tharu village visits” are experienced more like an extension or live representation of what is first observed at the Museum.

Guneratne (2001) describes this same village walk as an event organized by the high-caste tour guides in the nearby tourist town. The village walk allowed these guides to present themselves to foreigners as "forward"<sup>7</sup>, English-speaking people, much different from the "backward", "traditional", and "jungly" Tharus. This does not seem to be the case anymore, as the only tourist guide I observed entering the compound with foreign tourists is also a Tharu person. There are also large groups of Nepali tourists, generally from Kathmandu, who come to visit the museum, but do not partake in the village walk. During my first fieldwork, before the April 2015 earthquake, it was common to see groups of 10 to 20 tourists from all parts of the world visiting the village daily. During my second fieldwork, eight months after the earthquake, the number of international tourists had drastically reduced, but there were still many domestic tourists from other parts of Nepal arriving by bus every day to visit the museum. The village has

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<sup>7</sup> According to Guneratne (2001:503) "'Backwardness' and 'forwardness' are new concepts closely linked to processes of modernity, in particular a statewide system of schooling and the rapid development of commerce centered in bazaar towns". In the context of Pipariya, education is the most important attribute of "forwardness".



been for several years exposed to these visits from both Nepali and international tourists, making local Tharus well aware of diversity and the socio-economic differences that exist between them and other Nepalis and foreigners. Tharus are also aware of the comforts and privileges people from other areas enjoy, and migration is partly motivated by the desire to live a lifestyle comparable to that of the tourists who visit the area.

Regarding Pipariya's natural landscape, and the possibilities of employment in the local area, the national park has been both a curse and a—relatively small—source of income for the local Tharu people. While it has developed national and international tourism in the area, it has also kept the village of Pipariya and other surrounding villages under the constant threat of wild animals. Rhinos and wild elephants are especially problematic, as they come during the nighttime and devastate a family's entire vegetable garden in a matter of hours. Other Tharu communities, which were traditionally located within the limits of what became the national park, were forced to relocate and now inhabit land that is much less fertile than the fields they previously had. Relocation was necessary because the commission that created the park adopted a protected approach to biodiversity conservation. This approach implies that no human activity will develop in the space delimited for the national park. McLean (1999) argues that relocation due to the National Park was even more devastating to the Tharu community than the migration from the hills. Then, they were still able to inhabit lands and keep livestock that were of central importance to their identity and self-sufficiency. Now, they are forced to relinquish the land that formed the basis of their economic and cultural survival (McLean 1999:42). This western approach to conservation, which excludes human populations, has had extremely negative impact on the indigenous people of the area.

The national park has also affected the way in which land is perceived. Until the 1980s, the area to the south of Pipariya towards the Rapti River had cheap land, while the land to the north of the village was considered more expensive. There are stories about how in the past, while the hill migrants were moving into Chitwan, the Tharus got rid of the land adjacent to the Rapti River, which delimits the space of the National Park. Traditionally, the lands adjacent to the park were not considered the most desirable or expensive land, partly because of its proximity to the Rapti River, which meant that it could get easily flooded, and partly because of the presence of jungle animals. For Tharus, this was not well fitted for agriculture. Today, these are the most expensive lands in the area, where most hotels have been built. Some Tharus complain how their grandparents, focused as they were on their lives as farmers, sold the land cheaply without having a vision of the tourism that would develop in the area.

The proximity to a tourist destination has made it possible for some people from the Tharu community to be employed in either hotels, park attractions — mainly as nature guides — or tourism agencies. This participation is limited, however. At the moment, and due to the decline in tourism caused by the April 2015 earthquake and Nepal's current political situation, there was only one man from the village working at a hotel, while four others were on forced leave because of the lack of business. It is generally people from the poorer households, those who were traditionally landless, who tend to work for the hotels. Tharus from the elite groups do not want to work as employees in the hotels, and if they do, it is only while they are still young and probably unmarried. When I asked young men about employment prospects in the park or the adjacent tourist area, they would simply say that the hotels' wages are not enough. Some young men work as tourist

guides in the high tourism season, without really considering it a permanent or serious source of employment.

Despite the fact that the national park and the tourism it attracts comprise the most appealing employment opportunities in the area, Tharu people in this part of Chitwan are not the immediate beneficiaries of tourism. Many of the hotels and tourism agencies are owned by Bahuns, and this particular group monopolizes the tourism industry in the area. There have been attempts by Tharus to create locally owned guest houses, and although there are a few successful ones, these are not as big and do not attract as many international tourists as the more modern, well-connected to tourism agencies, Bahun-owned hotels do. Siva Chandra, a Tharu from Pipariya in his mid fifties, said in an interview, "In [the tourist town near Pipariya], all the hotel owners are people from outside. The Tharu, the people who have always lived here cannot own hotels in the town. We have small guest houses, and we also work in lower paying jobs in the hotels, but the people who get the money, are all these people from outside." Siva Chandra uses the term 'people from outside' (*bahirako maanche*) to refer to the hill migrants, in particular Bahuns. This reality further accentuates the social tensions between Tharus and *Pahariyaas*.

## **Part 2: A typology of destinations—where do migrants want to go?**

With the national park ruled out as a reliable source of income outside of agriculture, the possibilities of employment for Tharu men shrink. The job market in Nepal is particularly unfavorable at the moment. Even those who come from privileged backgrounds find that, after completing their studies, it is not possible to secure a job that

generates a significant income for the household. Many young Nepalis are opting to leave the country not only for employment, but also to pursue their studies abroad. They are largely supported by their parents in this decision. In a conversation I had with a middle-aged high caste Newari woman in Kathmandu, she expressed her frustration over her oldest daughter's fortune. Her daughter is 26 years old, and completed a Master's in Business Administration. After looking for a job for several months, she was finally able to find one as an administrative assistant at a local non-profit organization. However, the monthly salary is almost insignificant. As a woman, she is not expected to earn enough money to sustain a family; but it is frustrating that after investing so many years in her education, she is not able to have a substantial income. Her mother confided to me that she secretly hoped her daughter would be able to get a job abroad, because she did not think the situation in Nepal would get better any time soon. This conversation, happening in an urban setting, within a high-caste Newari family, with much better opportunities than Chitwan Tharus have, demonstrates that the desire to leave Nepal is expressed by people from all over the country's social landscape.

Leaving Nepal with a study visa to Japan, Australia or if possible Europe or the United States is a much more desirable way to emigrate than as a laborer. It is safer, as there are immigration laws in these countries that protect migrants. They are also able to settle in these destinations, obtain permanent jobs, and remit a much larger sum of money than people who migrate to the Gulf or Malaysia. Several Nepalis first leave the country with a student visa, and are later able to find employment and naturalize in the host country. There are institutes in Nepal's largest cities that prepare students in basic Japanese skills so they are able to apply for a visa to Japan. There are many other

institutes that prepare students for the certification necessary to attend university in Australia or the United States. Walking down the bazaar areas in cities like Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Pokhara, and Bharatpur, we can see plenty of billboards advertising these programs. This is a relatively expensive process, as the tuition cost for the institute, plus cost of exams, paperwork, visa and initial travel expenses equals 900,000 Nepali rupees, or about \$8,450, without considering tuition abroad. It is also necessary to have obtained at least a high school diploma. Despite the cost, migrating in order to study has become an aspiration for many young Nepalis, aspiration that is clearly present in Pipariya.

As shown in Figure 1, all of the Bahun households that have a member abroad have been able to send them to study in Australia. For Tharus, however, the reality is very different. Those who are currently residing in a developed country such as Australia, Japan, the US, or Europe have not necessarily reached there because of their educational qualifications. The first person to ever leave Pipariya to settle in the West was a young man who married an Australian anthropologist around twenty years ago. There is one young man who currently resides in the United States, because he won the Diversity Lottery this country offers. Another man, who has been living in Europe — his family assumes he is in Portugal— for the past six years, did so after he obtained a tourist visa to attend a conference in Switzerland, overstayed his visa and never returned to Nepal. In Pipariya, Tharus are more likely to migrate for labor to Gulf countries or Malaysia. Most of the young men who are currently in their twenties have not completed high school. They also do not have access to the large sums of money necessary to study abroad. For Tharus, the path to migration is more intricate, due to their lower social status as an indigenous group, and the relative lack of resources and access to the right networks.

During my second stay in Pipariya, I met Surendra and Hemraj, a father and son, who have followed very different migration patterns. Surendra was among the first people to leave Pipariya to work abroad. He spent three years in Dubai, and then continued working abroad in Saudi Arabia first, and currently in Qatar. He told me that his main motivation to migrate was to be able to send his children to good schools. Hemraj, his son, is currently studying for his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration in Bharatpur. He is one of the most educated young men in the village. When I talked to him in January of 2016, he was attending a Japanese language school, and applying for scholarships to finish his studies in Japan.

The different paths that Surendra and Hemraj are following demonstrate that there is a hierarchy of places where Tharus would like to migrate. The ideal kind of migration is to be able to do what Pipariya's Bahuns do: migrate for educational purposes, mainly to Australia but also to Japan. Australia is preferred because the language of instruction is English, while in order to go to Japan they need to learn Japanese.

Studying abroad, unfortunately, is not achievable for many members of the Tharu community. Hemraj is an exception in the community, and many of his peers consider him to be the smartest boy in the village. Compared to Bahuns, Pipariya's Tharus are not equally educated. Most people in their twenties have been able to pass the School Leaving Certificate (SLC), an exam taken after grade 10. Fewer of them have completed what in Nepal is called 'college' or '+2', two years of specialized education that follow the SLC. Even fewer have gone into university, although there is a university campus an hour away from Pipariya. The gender disparity is also enormous, and few girls have completed

their college exams. Bahuns of the same age, on the other hand, have all completed college education, and most of them also have university degrees. Despite the fact that Tharus are more educated now than they were twenty, or even ten years ago, they are still not on equal terms with Bahuns.

When people do not have the necessary qualifications to migrate in order to study, labor migration is the other option. Obtaining the Green card through the United States Diversity Visa Lottery, or being able to work in Europe, are also preferred, but extremely expensive and hard to obtain. Considering these difficulties, the next most sought after destination is South Korea. There is a bilateral agreement in place between the Nepali and the South Korean government, and 3,000 Nepalis each year go work over there (DOFE 2014). They are all employed by the state, which also covers the cost of migration, and it is a very safe job that pays well. The only condition is passing a Korean language examination, which motivates lots of Nepalis to study Korean.

Because there is a limited quota for Korea, the next option is individual migration to Gulf countries. People from Pipariya tend to go to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The UAE is preferred because there are not such strong social and religious rules and employers are able to speak English. In second place come Qatar and Bahrain, which are similar but more conservative, and last Saudi Arabia. Tharus who work in Saudi Arabia have mixed opinions about it. Because there is already a network of Tharus working there, it becomes an appealing, more familiar destination. However, they are not comfortable with the many religious rules, especially the prohibition on the consumption of liquor. Tharus are still able to buy all kinds of alcohol, but they do so in a

black market that is very expensive. The cultural shock of seeing women wearing the *burka* was also mentioned by all the people who have worked in Saudi Arabia. Veils are not particularly uncommon for Nepalis, but the *burka*—a full body cloak that also covers the eyes—caused strong impressions among them. Lastly, the restriction of movement, and the fact that unmarried men are only able to access certain public spaces and during determined days was another regulation that made Tharus uncomfortable.

The last place were people want to go abroad is Malaysia. Just like Saudi Arabia, there were some contradictory appreciations of Malaysia, because there is a large, already existing, network of Tharus who have migrated to this country. Tharus also feel that companies in Malaysia are less likely to cheat on workers, and once they arrive in the country they always work the job they were promised in Nepal. However, Malaysia is not a safe place. There are thieves on the streets, and many Tharus have been robbed or had their belongings stolen in this country. Roshan, who has recently returned to Pipariya after working in Malaysia for three years as a machine operator, complained about being robbed twice while walking on the street, and getting his phone and pay check taken away. It is this unsafe environment that places Malaysia at the bottom of the hierarchy of places Tharus want to go to, especially considering that being robbed is something that these people have probably never experienced in their home communities. If being abroad is not an ideal situation, then what are some of the factors that push young Tharu men to leave Pipariya in the first place?



### **Part 3: Push and pull factors of migration in Pipariya**

In migration studies, the movement of people outside of their places of origin can be explained through push and pull factors. The reasons why people migrate can be economic, political, cultural, and environmentally based. This section will examine some of the push and pull factors of migration in Pipariya, describing the causes and effects of each factor.

Push factors are events or situations within the home country or society that push people away from their communities. In the case of Nepal in general, and Pipariya in particular, push factors of migration include: 1) lack of job opportunities for the growing population, especially young men and women in their twenties, 2) decline in food production and food security due to fragmentation and splitting of family land, 3) the positionality of Tharu people within the Nepali society as a lower status ethnic group, unable to access the same privileges as higher caste people, and, until recently, 4) the internal Maoist conflict (Jha 2014).

As described earlier, the Tharu are considered to be an indigenous group of Nepal, and as such occupy a lower social position than high-caste Hindus. This makes it difficult for them to access certain jobs, especially government positions. At the same time, as more and more people become educated in the community, they aim to move out of the traditional subsistence farming economy, and look for jobs in the service or industry sectors. However, as explained, there are few opportunities in this part of Chitwan for young people to find work.

The other important push factor is the partition of land among the many families of the village. In Nepal, especially among high-caste hill people, it is common that family disputes or the death of the household head leads to land division among the sons (Bennett 1983:10). Although not as systematically as for hill people, this practice of land partition is also true of Tharu people in Pipariya. In the past, Tharus were reluctant to split the household, and several generations shared the same space (Müller-Böker 1999). Today, there is only one family in Pipariya that is still large. There are 15 people residing in this household, and their land amounts to almost 4 *bighas* (one *bigha* equals 0.68 hectares, this family's total land equals 2.72 hectares). All the families in the village, however, are rapidly splitting. Most families have divided their land between three to five years ago, and as a result, families that used to own several *bighas* of land now only have access to a few *katthas* (one *kattha* equals 340 m<sup>2</sup>). Bikram, one of the young men I interviewed in Pipariya, believes that migration has accelerated the process of splitting households: "Whenever there is a small discussion, the sons decide to split. They can do it now because they have money from abroad, and do not need the family anymore. So to avoid other disputes, they split".

The positionality of Tharus as a lower status ethnic group, the third push factor, has been discussed in Chapter 2. It is this perceived backwardness with respect to Bahun neighbors what pushes young Tharu men to migrate. Before the rapid expansion of labor migration to the Gulf and Malaysia, Tharu families—especially the elite—believed in education as the path to upward mobility. This educated status, however, has not been achieved at the fast pace that many of these families would have liked. As a consequence, many young Tharu men do not have the degrees that would allow them to obtain

scholarships to study abroad. In a cycle of need that repeats itself, Tharu men abandon their education to obtain a job abroad, with the idea that the money they make will enable their families to move up in Nepal's social hierarchy.

Ultimately, considering the dire prospects of employment within Nepal even for highly educated people, Tharu young men migrate for labor today to ensure that their children will receive adequate education and be able to migrate for study in the future. Anisha's husband left for the United Arab Emirates a year ago. She is a young woman, who still lives with her in laws, and has a 4-year-old son. With tears in her eyes, she tells me about how hard it has been for her since her husband left, and how lonely she feels inside the house. She understands—and as she says this her tears dry—that they are making that effort to make sure that one day her own son will be able to speak English and leave Nepal with a better job than his dad has at the moment.

The last push factor is the Maoist conflict. This conflict took place from 1996 to 2006, and affected mainly the Western districts of Nepal in its initial years. Later, it expanded to other parts of the country, including Chitwan. Sanjay, a 35-year-old returned migrant who went abroad to work in Qatar in 2003 for the first time, said that the reason why he migrated initially was because of the danger of staying in Nepal during the conflict. While the conflict started in 1996, it intensified in 2001, and many places in southern Nepal suffered the impact. Sanjay told me that it was very difficult for him to find a job in Nepal during that time, and because he was a young man who was not interested in joining the conflict, he saw the Maoists as a threat. He migrated to Qatar in 2003, and stayed there until 2006, when he returned for the first time. Although the

conflict was his initial push to migrate, after he returned he realized that there were still few job opportunities in his home town, and those available did not pay as well as his job abroad. Therefore, he decided to return to Qatar two more times. At the moment he is building a large, four-story house in his village, similar to the houses of Bahuns.

Ramesh, who is 35 and worked in Malaysia from 2004 to 2009, responded to my question about what changes he had noticed the most in his village after returning from abroad by focusing on the war. "When I came back to Pipariya, there was no more Maoist war in Chitwan. I left before the war ended, I could not get a job near Pipariya, but when I returned the war was gone and my brother and I were able to start our own small business." Sanjay and Ramesh's stories exemplify how all the different push factors of migration contribute to the decision of young men to leave the country.

Pull factors of migration, on the other hand, are positive events and situations abroad that attract migrants to leave their home communities. In the case of Nepal and Pipariya, these include: 1) the numerous employment opportunities found in developed economies of Gulf countries and Malaysia, 2) wages and salaries abroad, which are much higher than those in Nepal, 3) the fact that other members of the community are already working abroad, and 4) the social prestige associated with being a migrant.

The most important pull factor is created by the opportunities abroad, and the amount of money that migrants can make outside of Nepal. The development of the Gulf country economies, driven by the oil boom of the 1970s, created thousands of jobs in the construction and industrial sector. These economies turned to the huge masses of low skilled South and South East Asian workers for labor supply. Malaysia saw a similar

development. There are around 25 million migrant workers in Middle Eastern countries (Shah 2011), of whom three quarters come from Asian developing countries. It is estimated that these workers send home around \$60 billions in remittances (HRW 2016). Although the payment might be low for the amount of labor they provide, it is still a large sum for people whose main economic activity has traditionally been subsistence farming.

Because migration outside of the subcontinent has been taking place for over a decade now and it is a widespread practice, many families already have members working abroad. This acts as a pull factor for other young men. People tend to go to places where they know relatives or friends from their home villages have also been. This is how they get information about the kind of jobs available in certain countries or cities, and knowledge of what are some of the challenges they can potentially face.

The social network of migrants helps them stay informed of the realities abroad, and prepare for the difficult experience of labor migration. Dinesh, a 23-year-old man who worked in Saudi Arabia for two years, confessed that for several months he did not mention to his family the kind of work he was actually doing. He was working outside, carrying loads for a construction company. He was embarrassed because he did not have an office job. When interviewing non-government organizations in Kathmandu, this kind of scam operated by the manpower agencies seemed to be a recurring theme. Young men are promised an office position, and find out once they get to their destination that the job is actually in the construction sector. Lately, however, men are becoming aware of that, thanks to the information they receive from other relatives who have already migrated, and who advice them about which agencies and companies are reliable.

While several members of the household participate in the decision to migrate, the migrating young men are particularly impacted by it. For them, leaving the community increases their social capital, as they become part of a group that has a particular prestige and access to improved economic possibilities. Migration enlarges their social prestige. They are now earning foreign money, and are therefore perceived as better off than the rest of the people in the village. They are also perceived to have more knowledge of the world outside of the village, and outside of Nepal, and they behave accordingly. The Brotherhood of the Returned is one example of how the experience of migration acts as an agglutinating force for those migrating young men, and how they behave differently from the rest of the men and women from the village.

During my first stay in Pipariya, I was able to interview four young men who had not already migrated but were thinking of doing so. One of them, Ram, was a 22-year-old man who had finished the first year of a bachelor's degree in management. He decided to drop out of school and applied for a job in Saudi Arabia. He had already been offered a position at a Saudi dairy farm, and was expecting to hear the date of departure. He told me that his decision was based on the fact that even people who have a master's degree in Nepal are not able to make enough money. His uncle was already working for that dairy farm, and recommended that he applied for the job. He expected to be able to make enough money to arrange his sister's marriage and build a cement house for his family, and then get married too. Ram's aspirations reflect the desires and expectations of many young men his age.

Young men's lack of desire to engage in traditional agriculture affects the decision to migrate. As I walk through the fields of Pipariya, it is not uncommon to see mainly women of all ages and older men taking care of the crops and the cattle. Young men, even middle-aged men, are seldom seen working in the fields. Men, as actors of modernization, are firm defenders of the idea that Tharus should move away from agriculture into other sectors. Many of the middle-aged men of Pipariya have ventured into business, unfortunately unsuccessfully. Young people, especially those from the Tharu elites, have had access to higher education. Very few of them, however, have been able to finish their degrees and find stable jobs either in the nearby towns or in Kathmandu. The reality is that Tharu men have not truly been able to insert themselves in the economy outside of agriculture. As a result, many of Pipariya's young men after finishing high school do not go on into further education but remain unemployed in their homes. Every member of the household is expected to contribute to the family's economic wellbeing. Labor migration is a way to get someone who otherwise would be jobless to contribute to the household income.

Households are constantly looking to expand their assets, and employment in Gulf countries and Malaysia creates opportunities for these families to develop economically. It is the lack of job offers at home, and the difficulties these young men run into when looking for work that push them to migrate outside of Nepal. Therefore, Tharus understand this kind of migration not as an improvement of their individual living conditions by moving somewhere else, but as an improvement of the family and household conditions by enlarging the household income.

#### **Part 4: Preparing to leave—the agent and the loan**

Once the decision to migrate is taken, the next step is to find a job abroad. As stipulated by Nepal's Foreign Employment Act of 2007, manpower agencies are in charge of connecting Nepali people to employers throughout the Middle East and East Asia. There are around 700 agencies in Nepal, most of them located in Kathmandu. How do people from areas outside of the Kathmandu valley, then, access manpower agents? In Chitwan this is relatively easy, as there are around 40 or 50 agencies in the district. Most of them are located in Narayangarh Bazaar, the biggest commercial town of the district. These agencies are known locally as *overseas* and are generally linked to bigger agencies in Kathmandu.

Santosh, a Bahun man in his forties, is the person responsible for one of Narayangarh's largest agencies. His *overseas*, Daya Overseas Limited, has its headquarters in Kathmandu. He manages the regional branch in Chitwan. His overseas is responsible for finding jobs for lots of young Tharus. "I come from a Tharu town. I grew up with the Tharu people. They know me so they trust me" is his answer when I ask him why so many of his clients are Tharus. While social capital is important for migrants to connect with each other, Santosh as a manpower agent has his unique social capital, which allows him to attract more and more clients among the Tharu community.

Santosh is a busy man. In the forty-five minutes I spent at his house, his phone rang over a dozen times. He has been in charge of the overseas for twelve years now, and claims to be one of the first agents to settle in the region. Daya Overseas only sends workers to the Gulf countries, and according to Santosh's calculations, they are able to



send abroad around thirty people each month. I am interested in learning how people from the Tharu community know about him. "It works by word of mouth" he says. "Sometimes we have a job opening and 'my men' go to the town and offer it to people they know are looking for jobs. But most times they come to us, they come to the office sometimes, but mainly they know one of my men or they know me, they come asking for a job and when we have a position that we think the person is good for, we call them back." It has a snowball effect. The more people from one village are able to find jobs through Santosh's *overseas*, the more likely others from the same area will also rely on this agent.

The whole process, from the moment the young man approaches the agent until he is on a plane bound to his work destination, takes between one to two months. After the initial contact, the agent is in charge of finding the *right* job. This will depend on the qualifications of the worker. Some jobs require people with little educational background, while some others prefer people who have some level of English and a high school degree. To a certain extent, it is the qualifications of the migrant that will ensure him a good job abroad. Luck, and working with a reliable agent, will also contribute. Once the agent finds the right job, he gets in touch with the job seeker, and they arrange the price. I asked Santosh twice during our interview about the total cost of migration, but he avoided my question, reluctant to give me an answer. I have heard from men in Pipariya that agents outside of the Kathmandu valley charge workers an extra fee, which is illegal according to the government's regulations. His reluctance to respond made me wonder how much he would be charging his clients. The price the agent charges depends on the cost of passport, visa, plane tickets, health and government insurance, and any extra fees

incurred while communicating with the companies abroad, with prices varying between NR70,000 (\$657) and NR120,000 (\$1126) depending on the destination.

Once the prospective migrant accepts the job offer, the agent arranges for an interview with the company. Most reliable manpower agencies in Nepal work directly with the employers, and set up Skype interviews between the migrant and the prospective employer. The language of these interviews is generally English, as almost none of the employers speak Nepali, and sometimes agency employees work as interpreters if the migrant is not fluent in English. After the interview, the company decides whether to accept or reject the applicant. If the applicant is accepted, the company sends a contract, and the *overseas* starts arranging all the paperwork needed. First a passport is required, in order to get a visa. There are few places outside of the Kathmandu valley where passports can be obtained, and Chitwan district is one of them. It is a forty-minute bus ride from Pipariya to the office in Bharatpur where prospective migrants can obtain their passports. After receiving it from the government officials, migrants submit them to the manpower agent, who is the one in charge of arranging the visa. All the paperwork and the communication with the hosting company is done exclusively by the agent.

Once the passport and the visa are set, prospective migrants go for a medical check up, where they are examined in order to assess whether they are fit for work or not. Migrants are not able to bring their own certificate; they need to be examined in one of the facilities set up by the government to conduct the check up. The check up determines whether the person is physically and mentally able to work abroad. Once they pass the medical check up, prospective migrants need to attend a training provided by the Foreign

Employment Promotion Board, a government institution established in 2012 to ensure safer migratory processes for Nepali citizens. This training is only done in Kathmandu. Considering the large number of people who migrate from other regions in the country, especially Chitwan, I asked Santosh why his agency, or any other agency in the area, does not provide the training in Bharatpur. He responded that the cost of renting a venue and paying for the trainer to come to Chitwan would exceed the cost of each individual prospective migrant traveling to Kathmandu, staying there for a day to receive the training and returning to their homes. Migrants are responsible for covering the expenses of this training, and it is a compulsory step in the process.

The training includes a five-minute video and a talk by an officer from the Department of Foreign Employment. The topics covered include how to travel by plane, how to behave at an airport and inside a plane, and what to expect on arrival at the foreign country. The video contains images of cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Riyadh and Kuala Lumpur. It also talks about rules and regulations at the destination country, focusing mainly on the consumption of alcohol—extremely important for destinations in the Middle East where it is considered a social taboo—contact with foreign women, and gambling. The officer expands on the points included in the video, and answers questions from migrants.

After the training, the migrant purchases insurance, which is paid directly to the government. The cost of this insurance is NR1,000 (\$9.40). By paying this relatively small fee, the worker makes sure that the government will be able to help him in case of difficulties while working abroad, and ultimately that his family will receive

compensation if something were to happen to him. After all these steps are completed — the contract, the passport, the visa, the medical check up, the insurance— the agent waits for a final confirmation from the company, and once the date for arrival of new workers is set, he purchases the plane ticket for the migrant.

The agent becomes the link between the migrant and the outer world. Agents are responsible for ensuring that the job they promise the migrant, and what the migrant is actually doing abroad, coincides. This is not always the case, and there are many agents who, as my informants put it, *jhutto bolne*, or speak lies. These agents deceive workers, overcharging them for visa and flight costs, or lying about the working conditions abroad. Workers, as well as prospective migrants, know these facts and mistrust agents. However, as one of my informants told me "there is not much we can do, we need jobs and they have them, we can just hope they will not lie to us." Lack of certainty regarding legal migration, and the higher cost of it, push several Nepalis to migrate through informal channels.

All migration that is not done under a legal contract with a foreign company and without a sponsored visa is unregulated, and all migrants who do not leave from a Nepali airport are considered illegal. Because of the open border with India, many Nepalis choose to cross the frontier, and fly out of India to their work destinations. There are manpower agencies in Nepal that facilitate this process. Although it is cheaper than migrating legally out of Nepal, the real cost is hard to estimate because there are no official records of this kind of migration. The Nepali government does not recognize this kind of migration as legal, and is unable to assist these migrants abroad. If a migrant has

a serious problem abroad, such as exploitation or accidents, he or she is not able to request help from the Nepali government in terms of subsidies or repatriation. This is especially problematic for some of the most destitute groups in Nepal, people who are unlikely to be able to afford the legal migratory channels.

Most of the young men in Pipariya are able to migrate legally. Legal migration implies that the migrant has the capital to finance it. Tharus in Pipariya have, in comparison to other groups in Nepal, access to assets that allow them to be able to finance legal migration. Although unlike Bahuns, Tharus are not able to access bank loans due to lack of connections with bank owners, there are several microcredit entities around Pipariya, which provide small loans that families use to cover the costs of migration. These microcredit entities require only proof of citizenship and a land certificate to obtain a loan, and most Tharu families in Pipariya are able to provide those documents. They also do not require a guarantee, and do not require a minimum amount of land that borrowers should have in order to get a loan.

There are two different kinds of microcredit entities in Pipariya. One is called the *mahilaa samuha* or women's group. It works solely with women, and will be explained in the next chapter. The other kind, which is locally known as *bachaat* or simply microcredit, is organized based on farmers' groups. The oldest one around Pipariya was created 40 years ago. Membership in these microcredit groups is organized around small groups within a village, which then report to a larger group formed by representatives throughout the VDC. Some of these microcredit entities offer loans that are particularly geared to the development of agriculture, cattle farms, or small businesses, but others

allow families to get loans for their own purposes. This is how families obtain loans to help a son or a husband migrate. These loans have an interest rate of around 13%. The young man commits to return the money from the loan with the salary he makes abroad. Depending on the kind of job the migrant is able to get, this can take from one to three years.

Certain families, especially those with large amounts of land, are able to finance their children's migration by selling part of their fields. There is one Tharu family in Pipariya that recently sent their daughter to study in Japan. They sold three *katthas* (around 0.1 hectares) of their total of two *bighas* and ten *katthas* (1.62 hectares) to pay for part of the expenses. Having enough land and being able to sell it is a relative privilege, and therefore the family did not need to take a loan. This is particularly important considering that migration to Japan with a study visa is much more expensive than labor migration, and it is uncertain that this young lady would be able to work to pay back the loan, at least in the initial stages of migration.

While all of the Tharu families I interviewed relied on microcredits for loans and financing, most of the Bahun families are able to access loans from banks. This implies that the amount of money Bahuns are able to borrow is much larger than what Tharus can request from the microcredits. Banks allow clients to take loans of several hundred thousand rupees, while microcredits manage much smaller sums. Tharus in Pipariya are aware of this difference. One of the men I interviewed, a young entrepreneur, complained that Bahuns generally know the people who work at the banks, because these banks are generally run by other high-caste hill people, and therefore they are much more likely to

trust Bahuns and give larger loans than to Tharus. On the other hand, even those Tharus who are relatively big landowners never approach banks for loans. They believe that banks will refuse them the loan, so they approach the microcredit institutions instead. This partially explains why so many Bahun families are able to send their sons to study in Australia, despite the fact that they are not necessarily in better economic standing than some of their Tharu neighbors.

The financing of migration is as important as any other part of the process. It pushes Tharu households to incur debts, which are generally taken under the name of the household head or his wife. The prospective migrant finds himself with the moral commitment to repay that debt. This implies that for the first year of migration at least, migrants and their families are not able to save any of the money sent from abroad, as remittances are almost in their entirety used to repay the loan. In the next chapter, we will see how gender plays a critical role in the financing of migration, especially when women's microcredits are involved. The way in which different groups in Pipariya are able to finance migration sheds light into the differences of social capital between Bahuns and Tharus in Pipariya, and how this social capital allows Bahuns to engage in a more profitable kind of migration.

Loans generate debt, and remittances are the material element that allows Tharu families to repay these debts. Once the loan is returned, however, families can dispose of the remittance money in different ways. Reciprocity allows for migrants to be strong decision makers regarding the disposition of remittances. Hari, who left for Malaysia in the early 2000s and returned to Pipariya in 2012, told me about how much the village had

changed in the ten years he was abroad. More and more people were building cement houses, and there were more roads connecting everything. He has built his own cement house, and is now looking to expand part of it and turn it into a small shop.

Hari confessed he was extremely happy to return. Working at a hotel first, and then as a security guard in Kuala Lumpur, he came to hate the city, the messiness and dirtiness, as well as the street violence and the risk of being mugged. Returning to Pipariya, for him, was returning to a clean, safe space, where he was familiar with people. As one of the older people I interviewed (Hari is 44 years old), he offers a less romantic perspective of what 'abroad' looks like than younger migrants do. He understands that there are few opportunities in the village, but he also appreciates the easiness of Pipariya's life. As someone who has completed several migration cycles and always returned to Pipariya, Hari provides a good example of how labor migrants never fully break the connection with the village, and as such help transform the experiences of those staying behind. Hari's—as well as other migrant workers'—perception of both "home" and "abroad" have been shaped by the different interpretative frames with which he has made sense of those experiences (Levitt 1998:230). The following chapter is concerned with the social aspect of remittances as conceptualized by Levitt (1998), and how the influx of foreign money does not only transform the local economy, but class relationships and gender roles as well.



## **Chapter 5: Changing the community, one rupee at a time**

There are two different sides to the coin of migration. It is not only able to drastically change the migrant's life; it also deeply affects the different social spheres to which labor migrants belong. The last chapter focused on the motivations for young Tharu men to leave Pipariya. While explaining this process, we learnt that earning money abroad to remit to their families in their villages is the main purpose of the kind of labor migration in which Tharus from Pipariya engage. This chapter will focus on the other aspect of migration, the receiving end. As mentioned before, remitting is at the core of the motivations to migrate. Today, through Western Union and other money remitting agencies, migrants are able to send money from abroad easily and fast. It takes less than a full day for a person abroad to go to an office, make the transaction, send the transaction number to their relatives at home, and have that person pick it up from either one of the many remitting agencies' branches in the nearby tourist town, or in the bazaar. The relatives will then take the money they need for immediate expenses, and put the rest of the money in a bank or microcredit institution account.

The village has observed several social transformations in the last few years. Twenty years ago, the primary occupation of most Tharu families in Pipariya was farming, supplemented to varying degrees by non-farming income. For most people, land holdings were not sufficient to meet their yearly necessities, and even members of the higher classes would seek work in wage labor, outside of the agrarian economy (Guneratne 1994:157). Since then, Tharus' land holdings have continued shrinking. This has accelerated the decline in economic position of the more affluent classes, which no longer require the services of the landless peasants to work in the fields. In this context of

reduced land holdings and food insecurity, labor migration appeared as the most reliable opportunity to substantially increase household income. Because of the relative easiness of migration, more and more young men are able to find employment abroad, and Tharu families from all economic backgrounds are able to participate.

Because labor migration is readily available to lots of families, the cost of migration and the impact of remittances can be perceived across all levels of social interactions. During my stay in Pipariya, I noticed how remittances have allowed for change in four different levels of the village's social space. The first one is the relationship of Tharus to other community members, especially high-caste hill migrants. The second one is the relationship between traditional Tharu landowner and landless Tharus. The third one is the relationship between male and female Tharus. The fourth and last one is the relationship between Tharus of the older generations, and those of the younger generations.

It would take several months, probably years of ethnographic research, much more than I was able to do, to get to the core of how migration is shaping these four levels of interactions and probably many others that I failed to see. However, from my own research, I have identified the first level, the relationship and social tensions between Tharus and Bahuns, as the main motivator for labor migration. This motivation has been the focus of the previous chapter. The other aspects, on the other hand, seem to be present in the decisions people make about how to invest the remittance money. There were two that were particularly salient in the interviews I conducted, and in almost every interaction I had with people in Pipariya. The first is gender relationships, and the way

remittances have, to a certain extent, reinforced gender hierarchies in the village. The second is the Tharu traditional class structure, and how remittances have helped bridge the gaps between social classes. This chapter will focus on the positive and negative impact of remittances in these two kinds of social interactions in Pipariya

### **Part 1: Reconfiguring gender roles**

Traditional gender roles and limited access to resources pervade women's positionality in the migration and remittance process. An estimated 12% of all Nepali migrants are women (CBS 2011). In Pipariya, however, there are very few women who have left the community for reasons other than marriage, and none of them are migrant workers. Female out-migration is not unheard of in Nepal, and it is in fact rather common among certain ethnic groups, such as the Tamang. Tharus, however, seem to be against the idea of women migrating for work. In conversation with me, a group of middle-aged men in Pipariya, declared they strongly oppose the idea of Tharu women leaving the village to go work like the men do. Migration has a visible impact on the village's demographics: while it is easy to see women of all ages, you will mostly see young boys or older men in Pipariya. Male out-migration has another impact on Pipariya's social life: it is mainly women who are now at the front of the household.

Unfortunately, the literature on Nepali women and migration—whether migrant women or stay-behind women—is scarce. There have been a few studies conducted on how left-behind women have had to readjust and have been impacted by the migration of their husbands and sons (Adhikari and Hobley 2015, Maharjan et al. 2012, Kaspar 2005). However, these studies are all focused on hill women, and there are no studies on Tharu

women. This section advocates for the importance of understanding the activities women are in charge of in the private sphere, while at the same time discussing women's incursion into aspects of the public sphere due to migration.

Nepal is a patriarchal, patrilineal society, where females are expected to stay at home and take care of children while males move about to fulfill their role as breadwinners (Bohar and Massey 2009:640). Women, secluded in the realm of the household, define their social and political roles within the closed, private space of the family. In her analysis of female land ownership in South Asia, Bina Agarwal (1994) conceptualizes family dynamics as a "complex matrix of relationships in which there is ongoing (often implicit) negotiation, subject to constraints set by gender, age, kinship, and tradition" (Agarwal 1994:54). As such, she considers women to be constantly "bargaining" their positionality within the household. Women's access to resources, and ownership to these resources, delimits the amount of autonomy she will have in the private sphere—the family—and also the public sphere—the village.

This gendered distinction between public and private space is also true for the Tharu people. Ulrike Müller-Böker (1999) points out that Tharu men and women interact with one another more freely than the orthodox Hindu groups. She quotes Rajaure stating that Tharu women "are not mere shadows of their husbands, as they are in Hindu society. A husband tries to keep his wife happy and satisfied, otherwise she might take another husband or run away to her parents" (Müller-Böker 1999). However, there is no privileged status of Tharu women over men. A wife may eat the remains of her husband's meal but not vice versa, both can eat together in the same room but not from the same

plate, and the greeting following a long separation is performed in Hindu style, with the wife washing the feet of her husband and then drinking the water (Müller-Böker 1999:65). Gender roles are still strictly delimited, and most Tharu women remain within the private sphere.

Nepali society, just like any society, is in constant change. Gender roles and division of labor are also constantly being redefined. Some of these changes are propelled by migration and remittances, while others are not. While it is difficult to assess the real impact of migration in the changing society, I argue that in order to understand how these two phenomena are related, it is important to understand that for many Nepalis, migration is not seen as a permanent relocation outside of Nepal, but as a way to improve the household income. In that sense, there is little difference between a job abroad and a job within Nepal, with the exception of the salary someone is able to earn abroad versus domestically. Men, fulfilling their roles as breadwinners, go out into the society looking for jobs, trying to diversify the family income, at times unsuccessfully. In this process, they move further away from the traditional farmer role they have occupied. However, the land is still there, and the responsibility of working the fields falls upon those who stay in the household: the women. Maharjan et al. state that "[there is] a widening gender gap in workload as a result of migration" (2012:121). Women whose husbands are still in the household are more likely to receive help in their daily tasks. Those whose husbands have migrated must face the household workload by themselves.

It is in this environment that remittances become key to empower or disempower stay-behind women. For example, regarding education, Vogel and Korinek (2012) argue

that there are three ways in which gender may affect the relationship between remittance receipt and educational investment: (1) women, especially spouses or mothers left behind by migrating husbands or sons, can be remittance-allocating agents in their households, potentially promoted to be 'managers of the purse'; (2) girls and women can be the consumers of remittances; and (3) women can also be the senders of remittances, potentially specifying particular uses (e.g., education) for the remittances they send back home. The authors also point out that the latter is relatively rare in Nepal, given that women are still underrepresented among labor migrants, and it is even more rare in the context of Pipariya, as Tharu women do not migrate for labor. Women have the capacity to manage the remittance money; the space, however, is not always provided.

Women are relegated to specific spaces—all within the realm of the domestic, or private, hidden from the public eye. Interviewing one of the young leaders of the Tharu Welfare Society, I asked him about women's participation in this organization. He recognized that it is difficult to engage women in political activity, and the men in the Society struggle to achieve enough female representation. There is a regulation stating that there needs to be one-third female representation in any political organization, and this young leader admitted that they sometimes have to approach women they know individually and convince them to be part of the society; only occasionally have they had women themselves approach them to be part of it. This is not an issue exclusively affecting the Tharu people; women have historically had a small participation ration in partisan politics, and quotas are the policy implemented by the state to try to achieve higher participation, so far unsuccessfully.

During my second visit to Pipariya, the political landscape of Nepal in general and Chitwan in particular had shifted. The proclamation of the Constitution shortly after the May 2015 earthquake had been negatively received by most of the inhabitants of the Tarai. Groups like the Tharu and the Madhesis had become highly politicized in their attempts to get the national government to rescind the Constitution. While mainly men were present in the demonstrations, an event took place in the tourist area of Pipariya that made me question the extent to which women had become part of the political struggle of Tharus. A festival is celebrated every year during the last week of December in the tourist town near Pipariya. This festival, known as the *Hatti Daura*—the Elephant Run—is organized by the local Hotel Association, run mainly by Bahun men. It begins with a rally where Tharu women, dressed in traditional clothes, perform folk dances. This time, however, the Tharu women had decided not to participate in the event. The day of the rally, many women were congregated in the Tharu *tol*<sup>8</sup> complaining about the unfairness of their having to dance, while the *pahariyaas* got to profit from the event. I was positively struck by the women's decision, admiring their involvement in the area's political struggles. After inquiring more about this incident, however, I learnt that it had been mainly a decision taken by the men at the Tharu Welfare Society, and that women had complied with it.

While the role of women in breaking the traditional structure in public spaces is ambiguous, their presence in the private realm of the household is strong. As I walk around Pipariya in the dry winter months, women are visible and active at all times of the day. Early in the morning, as they feed the cattle, sweep the courtyard, and prepare the

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<sup>8</sup> The Tharu *tol* is the Tharu neighborhood, located generally at the center of the Tharu village.

morning meal. During the day, as they wash clothes, talk to each other, make stools, weave carpets, or attend a meeting for the women's group. In the evening, as they prepare the meal for their families, or sweep the courtyard once again; and late at night as they talk by the fire, joined by the other members of the household.

Changes in the resources women manage within the household due to their husbands and sons' migration might indicate changes in the traditional roles that women occupy, which could possibly be transmitted into the public sphere. Women in Pipariya have also become increasingly noticeable in the management of finances. The appearance of female microcredit groups has had a great impact on the financial capital women have access to. In Nepal, women's microcredit groups are known as *mahilaa samuha* or "women's group". Sarita is a woman in her forties who has been part of the *mahilaa samuha* since she arrived in the village after marriage. She lives in a small house near the middle of the Tharu tol, and is an active member of three different *mahilaa samuha*.

Despite being part of it for so many years, Sarita is unable to tell me how long these groups have been around. We ask other women around us, but nobody is sure. This is a difficult question, because most women in Pipariya came to the village in their late teens, after marrying. However, all the women seem to agree that the groups were not there when they first arrived, but were created around twenty years ago. Sarita explains to me that they meet the first day of every month, and that day all the women are supposed to give 50 rupees for the microcredit's fund. That day, those women who have taken loans also give their monthly interest back, and families who need to take new loans approach them with the request. Regardless of what the money is used for, or for whose benefit, it



must always be the woman in the household who is part of the *samuha* who takes the loan. Sarita also explains that there is more than one group in the village; there are around three or four, but not every household is represented in each group. However, people from all ethnic/caste groups are represented. I ask Sarita if it is only Tharu women who participate in these groups, and she says no. "The Bahun women also come, women have to come from all houses in the village. First we did not like to call them, we were ashamed because they have their Nepali language and we do not speak it well. So we would take turns to go to their houses and ask them to join the meeting, today it was her turn, next time her turn, nobody wanted to do it. But now it is fine, we are used to them now".

Sarita believes that being part of these groups has taught a lot to Tharu women. She says: "we are not educated, many of us older ones did not go to school, so we did not understand money, we only spoke our language, *Tharu bhaasaa*. But now we understand money, we know the price of things, we can go to the bazaar and not be afraid or ashamed". What Sarita describes as empowerment is also perceived as trustworthiness by men in the village. Men, whose wives or mothers have taken loans from the *mahilaa samuha*, mention that there were also "men's groups" that worked just like the women's ones, but men did not pay the money back on time and were not serious about it, so they all closed down, while the women thrived. One young man used the English word "transparent" to describe the *mahilaa samuha*. These microcredit groups have not only had the capacity to expand women's financial capital, they have also had an impact on their social capital and how women are perceived in the society as reliable managers of the household assets.

Unfortunately, a positive social perception does not necessarily imply that women do have power to decide what should be done with the loans they have agreed to take. In his analysis of women microcredit entities in rural Bangladesh, Rahman (1999) quotes Benería and Roldán stating that microfinance may increase women's income but this increased income does not imply changing women's position in the household in terms of power and authority (Rahman 1999). The strongest criticism of microfinance, supported by Rahman, is that rural women are vulnerable to the patriarchal ideology expressed most obviously in prevailing social norms and intra-household gender relations (Rahman 1999). Women are not using these loans for their own individual benefit; they are taking them to benefit another member of the household or the household as a whole.

Women have used their capacity to obtain loans to ensure their sons or husbands are able to migrate. During my fieldwork I interviewed seventeen men who had recently returned from working in the Gulf countries or Malaysia. Twelve of them had financed their migration partially through these microcredit loans to women. Women in Pipariya agree to their families' request to take out a loan to send their sons or husbands abroad; however, it is extremely difficult to assess whether they are willingly doing so, or obeying what is socially expected of them as women, as mothers, and as wives.

While considering the vulnerable aspects of microcredits, it is crucial to remember that Sarita believes that participating in the *mahilaa samuha* has given Tharu women confidence to engage in different economic activities outside of the household. Following Agarwal's argument that resource management is a source of empowerment for rural women, it is also plausible that participation in microcredit entities has expanded

the autonomy of women both within the private and the public sphere. Obtaining loans is how women have a stronger participation in the migration process. This would be a powerful claim supporting the argument that migration is not simply the decision of the migrant, but rather an activity in which the entire household participates.

The fact that women assume the burden of a loan in order to contribute to their sons' or husbands' migration, establishes a commitment between the two. Many of the men I interviewed said that the reason why they stayed abroad initially is to be able to send money that would allow their families to pay the loan they took in order to migrate. In chapter 3 I introduced the story of Sandeep, who was part of a group of Nepali migrants that protested against unfair working conditions and managed to return to Nepal. Upon returning to Nepal Sandeep was immediately set up by the manpower agency with a job in Malaysia. He confessed that the main reason why he returned abroad so quickly was because his wife had taken out a loan from the local *mahilaa samuha*, and they needed to start paying it back. Microcredit entities have expanded the role of stay-behind women in the migration process. Women contribute to migration by assuming the responsibility of these loans, while men commit to remit money home to pay back the loan.

The internal organization of the family will influence the autonomy of women, how much access they have to the remittance money, and how much decision-making power they have within the household. The ideal Hindu joint family is characterized as an extended household, comprising two or more generations of a patrilocal family, with the oldest active male as the household head (Agergaard 1999). The father's wife, sons,

daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters and grandchildren form this joint family. Despite the fact that households are based on some kind of family and kinship relationship, households are subject to continuous changes (Agergaard 1999). Disputes arise, and sometimes the sons decide to split off from the joint household, dividing the land and building individual houses for their nuclear families. Tharus pride themselves in not splitting households as often as Bahuns do and of having more harmonious family relationships. In Pipariya, however, there is only one household left of considerable size, with a total of fifteen members, including the father, and his four sons with their respective wives and children all living in the same compound. When I interviewed the household head, he expressed pride in having such a large joint family, with no desire to split. On two different occasions, however, when talking to some of the young men in their early thirties, they recognized that lately Tharu families are splitting faster than before. One of them believes that labor migration plays a role; from his perspective, once the husband starts making money abroad, the wife will try to convince him to split from the household so that she can directly benefit from the remittances without having to go through the in-laws. Joint and split families have different members of the household as recipients of remittances, and there are different kinds of tensions that arise from that situation.

In my interviews with migrant workers' wives, I asked about some of the challenges they perceived since their husbands left. Women who still live in joint households focused on how difficult it was for them to have a voice of their own in the house, and how they were asked to do the hardest work. One in particular mentioned: "It is very hard when your husband is not around to talk to your father in law for you, no?"

Then it is like no one hears you." It is true that the tensions would still be there if the husbands' stay home, but the women I interviewed all seemed to believe that the presence of the husband mitigates some of the tension.

Women who live in split houses, and whose husbands are the household heads, have different challenges and experiences. They focused on the difficulties they face taking care of the fields, and raising their children by themselves. However, they all agreed that it was good for them not to have the pressure from other relatives inside the house. One story is particularly interesting. Sudha is a 33-year-old woman. She has one son aged 17, and a daughter aged 13. Her husband left for Malaysia 10 years ago. He returns every two years, stays for a month and then returns to work in Malaysia. A year before leaving for Malaysia, Sudha's husband acquired a small flourmill. After he left, Sudha has been in charge of running the mill. She is one of the very few women in the area in charge of businesses of any kind. One important thing about Sudha is that she is a Bahun woman, not Tharu. Bahun women are relatively more empowered than Tharu women, and are much more present than Tharu women in public roles. There are more Bahun women who work as teachers, even as accountants at local microcredits, roles that are beyond the reach of many Tharu women.

Sudha's words, however, reflect the feelings of all migrants' wives, regardless of caste or ethnicity. She told me how it was difficult at the beginning to be a woman in charge of the business, especially when it came to hiring men for work and telling them what to do. However, 10 years later, Sudha is the de facto owner of the mill. Three men work for her, and esteem her very highly. I could appreciate the interactions between

Sudha and her workers while I was visiting the mill, interactions that were built on respect, regardless of my presence there. Sudha explained to me: "I have my own work and I think that is good, all the other women who are also alone should do like I do, the work in the fields is not a good kind of work, they should get their own things, their own work, and raise their kids well, do things well for their own family." Sudha feels independent and able to make decisions by herself, without having the intromission of the extended family. She is considered a strong personality in the community, and she is aware of this.

Remittances impact women differently in joint or split households because there is jealousy from those who are also members of the household but do not receive remittances. The tensions between young women and their in-laws have been thoroughly documented by Lynn Bennett in her ethnographic fieldwork in the hills of Nepal (1983). Bennett states that "probably the most common reason for a woman to encourage her husband to separate from the joint family is the demanding presence of the *sasu* or mother-in-law" (1983). This relationship is particular to Hindu societies, and is sometimes also observed among the Tharu population of Pipariya. This is especially evident in cases where the migrant decides to send the money to his wife, despite his household not being split. Parents believe that they should be naturally entitled to the remittance money. In a conversation I had with a group of men in their 50s, I learnt that they consider it useless to send the money to the wife, because she would spend it on herself and not share it with her father and mother in law. One man even said that generally, when the son sends the money to his wife, she would spend it on buying new clothes and running away with a new boyfriend, while the son is working hard abroad.

When I posed the same question to a group of migrant workers' wives, their attitude was quite the opposite. From their perspective, they rightfully use the money for their children's education and house, field, and medical expenditures, or when their in-laws get sick, so they felt that was an unfair accusation from the men. Who is right or wrong is not the question here, what matters is that there is an extra element added to the already not always good relationship between the daughter-in-law or *buhari* and the parents-in-law or *sasu/sasura*.

While the physical absence of men is important in changing women's roles, the amount of money migrants are able to remit from abroad is also highly significant. When remittances are low, the workload of women increases. Women need to work more in the field and sometimes to engage in wage labor in order to feed their families while at the same time pay the moneylenders for the loan taken before migrating (Kaspar 2005). When remittances are high, women's workload diminishes, and in certain cases they are even able to move out of agriculture into other kinds of work. In some cases, opting out of agriculture is perceived as a privilege; in others it is more of a necessity because of the low revenue obtained from the land. Sudha, the woman we already introduced, is an example of families opting out of agriculture. In the case of this particular family, once the household split, the land owned by the parents was divided among the three sons. Post-partition, the plots were really small, and that is why Sudha's husband decided to sell the land and acquire the mill. When asked about what she does with the remittance money that her husband sends, Sudha talked about using part of it to run the mill, especially when there is a technical problem. However, she focused on being able to send her children to prestigious English-language private schools, because the mill already

provides income necessary for daily subsistence. She has also been able to expand the mill through the remittance money.

Sudha's story leads to another important aspect affected by migration: the decision-making power that women have in their communities. Studies on stay-behind women in other parts of Nepal have found that after male out-migration, women are relatively more active in decision making, especially in agricultural decisions such as what crops to grow, when to hire workers, or go for wage labor themselves, renting in and out land, and in small sales and purchases of livestock (Maharjan et al. 2012:121). Women still consult their absent husbands about it, but they are the ones deciding how to spend the money. This freedom to decide is limited, however, and women still depend on their husbands or older male affinal kin to make bigger decisions (Maharjan et al. 2012). Some of the decisions for which women are still dependent include land purchase, the construction of new buildings or improvement of existing ones, purchasing large livestock and the selection of schools for their children. Overall, Maharjan (2012) concludes that stay-behind women tend to retreat to more passive roles when their husbands return from abroad. These conclusions match the reality of Pipariya as well, where most women enjoy a limited freedom while managing the remittance money; however, once the husband returns to the household, they retreat to the shadows of their traditional roles.

As Kaspar (2005:v) states, as more and more men migrate in search of work, "women become de facto household heads meanwhile their husbands remain formal household heads." Access to remittance money by women is determined by their



positionality within the household, particularly concerning whether the household is split or not. At the same time, traditional roles of women in Tharu society act as constraints that women need to navigate. Institutions such as women's microcredit groups allow for women to have access to more resources, and give them greater bargaining power within the household. Because this kind of labor migration is a relatively recent phenomenon in Pipariya, I believe more time is still needed to truly demonstrate to what extent women's role have been transformed.

## **Part 2: Breaching the social divide**

While certain aspects of remittances allow for upward mobility of the Tharu as a whole, it would be simplistic to state that all Tharus are equally impacted by labor migration. This is because not all Tharus have the same socio-economic status. Remittances, therefore, have also had a strong role in altering some of the traditional social hierarchies of Tharu people. To a certain extent, it could be argued that remittances reduce income inequality by allowing households that were traditionally poor to improve their livelihoods. At the same time, access to remittances is unequal, and not all households receive the same amount of money.

Economists, as well as sociologists, geographers and anthropologists, have tried to understand the role remittances play in the development of the Global South. In the particular case of Nepal, Sunam and McCarthy (2016) argue that remittances have accomplished what international aid and development could not achieve for the Nepali economy. The authors imply that the large influx of foreign money that entered Nepal mostly during the second half of the 20th century in the form of development aid, was not

able to help the Nepali economy thrive, at least not to the extent that remittances have been able to. This is a controversial observation, given that Nepal has historically received, and continues to receive, large amounts of foreign aid.

When Nepal started receiving international aid in the 1960s, the amount it received as percentage of its GDP was 2%. The amount of foreign aid peaked around 1990, when it reached 15% of the country's GDP (Bhattarai 2009). In 2014, this amount was 4.5% of the GDP (World Bank 2016). For much of the 90s and early 00s, Nepal was considered a country that relied, perhaps too heavily, on foreign aid to keep its economy afloat. Nepal's major donors for several decades have been the United States, the United Kingdom, India, China, Japan and before the 1990s, the USSR. The acceptance of aid did not come without political implications and policy expectations from the donors (for a discussion of this, please refer to Khadka 1997). Each donor country tried to push its own political agenda forward in Nepal. At the same time, development aid promoted dependency by the Nepali government, and discouraged the national economy from specializing outside the traditional agrarian sector.

As the influx of development money grew, its impact began to be strongly felt in the Nepali society. Nanda R. Shrestha (2001) tells the story of returning to his hometown in Kaski district after seven years of studying in the United States, and realizing how much the physical and social landscape had changed. Foreign aid was responsible for those changes: "Most of the newly acquired wealth," he notes, "was closely tied to foreign monies flowing into Nepal in the form of aid and debts" (Shrestha 2001:xix). During the second half of the 20th century, the large influx of foreign money fueled

Nepal's dependence, and developed the belief that Nepal's poor, agrarian economy was hopeless without development aid.

Interestingly, as the flow of foreign aid began to decline, the number of migrants and the amount of remittances received by Nepali families increased. Today, remittances account for 25% of Nepal's GDP (World Bank 2015). This indicates a change in dependency: from development aid to remittances, Nepal's economy has subsisted from the entry of foreign money into the national economy. The main difference in how development aid and remittances impact society, however, is based on who can directly benefit from each. While international aid benefits mainly the government and the higher castes that have access to jobs in the development sector, remittances have a more democratic impact. The relative easiness of migration after the implementation of the Employment Acts of 1985 and 2007 have made it possible for Nepalis from all backgrounds, regardless of caste or ethnicity, to be able to send workers abroad. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, there are different costs associated with the different kinds of migration, and not all families are able to equally afford these costs, and therefore, equally receive remittances. Regardless, remittances benefit a much wider group of Nepali families than foreign aid ever did, probably given the fact that foreign aid goes through lots of bureaucratic procedures before reaching the people.

Many scholars oppose the idea that remittances bridge inequalities, at least in the initial stages of migration (Koechlin and Leon 2007). Ebeke and Le Goff (2009) point out that differences in income distribution within the originating society have a great impact on the inequalities produced by remittances. In other words, people from more

economically secure backgrounds are able to find better opportunities abroad, which allow them to remit larger sums of money. Bahun families in Pipariya tend to send their sons to study in Australia or other developed countries. After getting a bachelors degree abroad, their sons are able to find jobs that allow them to remit larger sums of money than those who left Pipariya to work in low-skilled jobs in the Gulf or Malaysia. Acharya and Leon-Gonzalez (2012) affirm that remittances from India are able to reduce inequalities in Nepal, because of the larger participation of the poor —especially *Dalits*, the untouchable castes— in the Nepal-India migration process. Remittances from Gulf countries are only able to reduce inequalities in areas where there is a high concentration of people working in these countries. According to the Center for Study of Labour and Migration— which is based on data from the DOFE regarding the amount of labor permits that have been issued to inhabitants of each district to work outside of the Indian subcontinent—Chitwan district, where Pipariya is located, is the tenth largest migrant sending district in Nepal<sup>9</sup>. The village, therefore, could respond to patterns that allow for remittances to reduce inequality.

Tharus are particularly situated in Chitwan's social structure, as they belong to a middle group in terms of social and economic status. There are other groups in Chitwan with lower socio-economic status than Tharus, particularly *Dalits*. At the same time, and as I have explained before, there are other groups in Chitwan, especially the Hindu high-castes, which occupy a much better socio-economic position regionally and nationally.

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<sup>9</sup> The other nine districts are, in descending order: Dhanusa, Mahottari, Jhapa, Siraha, Morang, Saptari, Sunsari, Nawalparasi and Tanahu.

Besides inter-group social differences, Tharus also have a historic internal class hierarchy originating in the revenue collecting system designed by the Rana regime for the Tarai, and implemented in 1861. This system was known as the *jimidaari* system, and divided Chitwan's society into three strata based on access to and control of land (Guneratne 1996). The dominant class was that of the *jimidaari* families, which controlled the majority of the land and served as revenue collectors. There was a peasant "middle-class" known as the *raiti*, large households that worked land that belonged to the state and paid taxes to the *jimidaar*. These families were settled in the village, near the *jimidaar*'s house. The lower class were the *bahariyaa*, landless peasants who moved every few years from village to village, supplying labor in exchange for clothes, food, and housing. The *jimidaari* system was formally abolished in 1964. Today, the *jimidaar* is essentially an honorific title given to descendants of the old *jimidaar*; they do not have control over tenants, and the title will likely go out of use in the near future.

Space around the village is still organized based on these kinship relationships. In Pipariya, people from the former *jimidaari* lineage live at the center of the Tharu *tol*. *Raiti* families of different lineages all live in houses surrounding the *jimidaari*'s house. Bahariyas, on the other hand, live in more peripheral areas, near the village school. This traditional hierarchy is also present in the amount of land these different groups own, although remittances are clearly changing people's access to land.

In general, landholdings in Pipariya—as in much of Nepal—have been shrinking for a variety of reasons. Arjun Guneratne states in his dissertation that former *raiti* families reported owning from 30 to 40 *bighas* (1994:157) before the arrival of hill

migrants, and this number had already reduced to between 1 and 5 *bighas* per household, with 2 *bighas* (1.28 hectares) being the average in 1994. In a survey I conducted, most former *raiti* families own between 1 and 2.5 *bighas*, with only the former *jimidaari* family owning 4 *bighas* (2.71 hectares). Intensive settlement in Chitwan from the hills, and the loss of land from Tharus to rural development and to hill people are the main reasons behind the shrinking of landholdings (Guneratne 1994). Currently, a rapidly expanding population in the district has led to the further sub-division of land. As such, former large landowning families are much less likely to employ former *bahariyaas* as workers in their fields, putting this group in a difficult position to find employment. These changes in the agricultural landscape of Pipariya generate a desperate need for families to find a livelihood outside of agriculture.

Villages surrounding Pipariya are also experiencing changes in the social landscape. There is a larger town nine kilometers northeast of Pipariya, which we will call Rampur. Rampur is considered to be the largest Tharu village in the area. In the 1970s, during the internal migration of hill populations, very few Tharu landlords in this town sold their lands to the newcomers. Today, this is a village of around 2,000 inhabitants, where almost everyone is Tharu. Because of its homogenous ethnic composition, it allows for a more interesting comparison of how the old Tharu hierarchy has been affected by remittances. Entering the town from the road that leads to Pipariya, passing by the newly built high school compound, we encounter a row of large cement houses. Most of these houses look fairly new, and unlike other Tharu houses, which tend to leave at least a few meters of separation between different household compounds,

these houses are all built one next to the other. These are large, two-story houses, and are all similarly built.

As I walked around Rampur with Mahendra, my research assistant, he pointed out the houses, saying that these were houses of landless people (*sukumbaasi*). I was intrigued by his use of the word, which I have only heard in the context of Kathmandu slum-dwellers, and asked him what kind of *sukumbaasi* these people were. He then used the word *bahariyaa* to refer to them, commenting how fifteen years ago this was a poor area of the town. Today, however many families had at least one son working in the Middle East, and it was *bideshko paaisa* (foreign money) that had allowed the families to build these big cement houses. Today, this is a distinct area of Rampur, with houses that look much more modern than the rest of the houses in the village, except for the *jimidaar*'s new house.

This physical expression of newly acquired wealth also acts as a determinant of social class standing. Other former *raiti* and *jimidaari* groups have also used remittance money to build cement houses. However, these houses are not necessarily as big as *bahariyaas*' new houses. Lower classes aim for a much more visual representation of the family's newfound economic stability. Mahendra, who is part of the Tharu elite, disagrees with these families' use of the remittance money in the construction of a new house. In his opinion, remittances should be invested in education. As a member of the higher Tharu classes, and part of a politically engaged select group of Tharus, Mahendra strongly believes in education as the only way to bridge the gap between Tharus and

Bahun. The Tharu elites aims to invest in education in an attempt to imitate Bahun migration practices.

Regarding changes in traditional social hierarchies, something similar is happening in Pipariya. Looking at the map from the last chapter (Fig. 1), we can see that the area traditionally inhabited by *bahariyaa* people, located in the western part of town, is from where a lot of people have migrated. Bijay Mahato is an elder from Pipariya, whose house is located directly behind the village school. Bijay comes from a landless family, but has managed to buy 15 *katthas* of land relatively recently (around half a hectare). This land belonged to one of the *raiti* families of Pipariya, and used to be worked by Bijay's stepfather. The *raiti* family sold it to a Bahun, and Bijay continued working it. A few years ago, the Bahun wanted to sell land to send his son to study in Australia, and Bijay bought it from him. How was someone who had little access to capital able to buy land, raising his status from landless to landowner? Labor migration can explain this.

Bijay has two sons. The eldest did not pass the School Leaving Certificate after completing 10 years of education. Because of that, his son decided to become a police officer. This was around the time the Maoist insurgency intensified in Chitwan. As the situation became more violent, especially for people involved with security forces, his son decided to run away and migrated illegally to Malaysia, where he got a job as a security guard. He has been working in Malaysia ever since. Five years ago Bijay's youngest son decided to follow in his brother's foot steps and applied for a job as a



security guard in Bahrain. Thanks to the money his two sons send him from abroad, Bijay was able to buy the land he now owns.

Remittances, while not reducing differences completely, can generate positive change in social class dynamics. As migration becomes available to wider sectors of the population, people from less privileged backgrounds have greater opportunities to improve their livelihoods. As such, remittances have a democratic component that foreign and development aid never accomplished in Nepal. A democratized access to migration has allowed for different social classes within the Tharu community to improve their livelihoods, reducing inequalities.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The night was falling, and a chill wind forces everyone to close and tighten up our coats, in this cold December night. As I entered the gate for my flight out of Tribhuvan International Airport, in Kathmandu, I started noticing the faces of those traveling that night with me. European tourists, a group of workers from an international non-government organization, old hippies. And many, many Nepali men in their twenties and early thirties. The older ones, confident, patiently wait for the instruction to board the plane. The younger ones, nervous, gather in small groups, anxiously talking to each other, asking questions to the flight attendants, or incessantly making phone calls. The bus picks us up from the gate and drops us at our plane, bounded for Abu Dhabi. I walk to my sit, and find myself sharing the row with five other young Nepalis, all frantically talking to each other. I ask one of them: "Is this your first time on a plane?" "*Ho, hajur!*" he replies with a nod, addressing me with utmost respect. "Where are you going?" I continue. "Saudi, *hajur*. I am going to start a job there in two days." While we talk, the flight attendants get the plane and the passengers ready to take off. One of the young men near me ignores the signal to turn off cellphones, and continues talking, maybe with his mother, maybe his father, a sibling, or a young girlfriend—all those who stay-behind as he leaves Nepal.

These young men, just like all those I have met in Pipariya, are leaving Nepal, eager for the opportunity to provide their families a better future. As they leave, they create empty spaces at home, spaces that reconfigure how their family members interact with each other, and with other members of their local and national community. As Michele Gamburd so eloquently explains in the conclusion of her research in Sri Lankan

female labor migrants, "labor migration has led to the shifts in local gender roles, caste hierarchies, and class relations. As individuals and families have negotiated these hierarchies, the power structures themselves have evolved and changed. Gender, class, and caste are fluid identities situated in overlapping systems of power and authority. People constantly use these systems and, through this use, re-create and change them" (2000:232). These shifts that Gamburd describes in rural Sri Lanka, are also perceived—although with different, uniquely localized results—in the rural areas of Nepal.

This ethnography is an attempt to sketch the complicated social relationships of Pipariya, and the role migration has played in altering them in the last fifteen years. Pipariya was far from a static society before the expansion of migration, and the different migratory currents that altered its social landscape demonstrate this point. The Tharu people, as one of several groups that inhabit this space, feel particularly determined to call it home. Despite this, they understand that their lands offer little economic security, and venture abroad in order to improve their households' assets. In the process, individual migrants gain status within the society, while at the same time risking their health and renouncing the comforts of village life.

Acting as a single unit, Tharu households agree that the risks are necessary in order to ensure upwards-social mobility. In the process, the lives of those who stay behind are transformed by the migrant's absence. It is the close knitted relationship of the household, and a sense of obligation to one another, that creates the space for transformation of the household. Labor migration in itself does not have the capacity to connect places. Places are already connected at different levels, and migrants can also

live in relative isolation from the host culture, as is the case of South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia. Migration, however, has the ability to generate rapid exchanges between societies, and allow for opportunities that were previously beyond a population's reach.

Male migrants, as expected breadwinners, have the obligation to find out ways to generate income, and therefore their migration is a challenge personally accepted, as well as supported by the rest of the family. The family, however, needs to reallocate time and resources after the men leave. As they allocate resources, they improve their housing conditions, or buy land, as a statement towards the rest of the society that they are able now to access assets that were previously beyond their reach. As they reallocate resources, women find a space to manage finances, contributing to the migrant's migration. At the same time, women, as the main stay-behind actor, bargain traditional gender roles and cultural constraints as they expand their decision-making power. Unfortunately, there is still not enough evidence that women can maintain these newly acquired empowerment roles. Time will tell to what extent are women redefining their location in both the public and the private space of Pipariya.

Many of the stories shared by my informants illustrate that change does not happen in one single direction, or over a specific period of time. Rather, social changes take place at a wide variety of level. Different households, with their unique compositions, will perceive changes differently, and will reorganize their private sphere in sometimes contrasting ways. Elaborating one single explanation to the impact of migration is a limiting approach. However, it is important to understand certain

commonalities to Tharu life that unite this group as an entity in contrast to other castes and ethnicities that surround them.

I acknowledge that human relationships are dynamic and constantly changing, and the people of Pipariya are no exception. I do not expect this momentarily reality of Tharus to hold as it is described in these pages. Hopefully the people of Pipariya will find a means of subsistence that allow for a safer employment situation, and keeps the community closely knit. Tharus in Pipariya are extremely proud of their cultural heritage, and I hope they are always able to represent this, as they insert themselves in the conversation of a globalized world.

## Glossary

Many of the words used in this glossary and throughout this thesis are based on definitions by Guneratne (1994). The spelling of Nepali words in Latin alphabet, however, follows the conventions of the language program taught at Pitzer College in Nepal.

<i>aadivaasi</i>	Aboriginal; indigenous person
<i>bachaat</i>	Microcredit entity.
<i>bahariyaa (Th.)</i>	A servant who lives and works in his or her master's home on a yearly contract.
<i>bahirako maanchhe</i>	Person from abroad, or outside the community.
<i>bahun</i>	Local Nepali term for Brahmins.
<i>bideshko paisaa</i>	Money from abroad.
<i>bigha</i>	Nepali land measurement unit, equivalent to 0.68 ha.
<i>brahmin</i>	A varna (caste) in Hinduism specializing as priests, teachers and protectors of sacred learning across generations. They are at the top of the caste hierarchy.
<i>buhari</i>	Daughter-in-law.
<i>Dalit</i>	"Untouchable" caste members.
<i>doon</i>	Inner Tarai valley.
<i>Gurkha</i>	Nepali soldier in the British Indian Army.
<i>Jana Andolan</i>	People's Movement, a multiparty movement in 1990 that brought an end to absolute monarchy and the

beginning of constitutional democracy. It also eliminated the Panchayat system.

<i>jangli</i>	Associated to the jungle, savage.
<i>jhutto bolne</i>	To lie.
<i>jimidaar</i>	A revenue collector, responsible for revenue collection and agricultural development in a village
<i>kattha</i>	Nepali land measurement unit, equivalent to 340 m <sup>2</sup> .
<i>koselee</i>	Gift, present.
<i>madheshi</i>	Groups of people who came to Nepal from Northern India several generations ago.
<i>mahilaa samuha</i>	Women's microcredit groups.
<i>overseas</i>	Nepali term for manpower agencies that send labor migrants to Arab Gulf Countries and South East Asia.
<i>pahaar</i>	Hill.
<i>pahaariyaa</i>	Someone from the hills of Nepal, mostly used to refer to Brahmin and Chhetri caste members.
<i>panchaayat</i>	Village council; the lowest administrative unit in Nepal from 1960 to 1990.
<i>pooja</i>	Ritual celebration to worship a god, or honor a person.
<i>raiti</i>	Landholding peasants subject to taxation.

<i>sasu</i>	Mother-in-law.
<i>sasura</i>	Father-in-law.
<i>School Leaving Certificate (SLC)</i>	National exam taken after completing 10 years of education in all schools in Nepal.
<i>sukumbaasi</i>	Landless person.
<i>taal</i>	Plate.
<i>Tharu bhaasaa</i>	Tharu language.
<i>tika</i>	A mixture of uncooked rice grains, yogurt and red powder placed on the forehead of someone in special or religious occasions, or as an expression of honor.
<i>tol</i>	Tharu neighborhood.



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