

## **The seasonal migrant labourers living at the edges of the state**

The Himalayas stretches 2400km from the Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan's western frontier to India's northeast borders of China and Burma. This region accommodates an ethnically diverse population of people and flora and faunas. However, the region has experienced socio-political and environmental changes that have been tied to the formation of nations and modern territorial states, consecutively.

Situated, at the foothills of the Eastern Himalayan region, Darjeeling surrounded by political boundaries of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim act as a Summer place /capital that has globally earned a reputation for its luxurious tea and its scenic beauty. Occasionally it is also referred to as "Switzerland" in political speeches and further from a touristic gaze, it has also been a place to be consumed and visited. These touristic notions that Darjeeling has earned today is due to the colonial construction of 'Darjeeling as the actualisation of Victorian design', it was not a process of innocence but a "violent" one, 'conditioned by the interplay of governance, capital, and labour' (Middleton 2018). Darjeeling was transformed into a hill sanatorium, uprooting the pre-existing 'primaeval forest' and rooting in its place lush tea gardens. 'Making of Darjeeling hills required an immense amount of labour far more than the indigenous populations could provide' (Middleton T. 2018). Since capital emigrates labour, 'one of the catchphrases *``chiya ko butta ma paisa falcha``* enriched the imagination of Muglan to aspiring individuals seeking a better living condition from that of the oppressive monarchical rule in Nepal. 'Officials tapped a growing pool of waged labour who moved into Darjeeling from ecologically marginal mountain lands of Eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet' (Encounters, 2016). Since it was a product of imperial capitalist expansion, labourers were negotiated, manipulated and brought into the market. The transformation of pre-colonial spaces of 'Dorji-ling' into colonial and contemporary space of Darjeeling was burdened upon intense exploitation of a 'coolie proletariat'. The laboured spaces of Darjeeling was a product of the labour of these labouring masses across the eastern Himalayan region.

Considering Darjeeling's significant pre-colonial and colonial history, its geographical location coupled with imperative economic significance also acts as a space of opportunity for the mobile /migrant (seasonal) labourers from within India and also abroad, especially from Nepal. The 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship treaty allows "citizens" of both the nation-states to work and settle within their respective political boundaries, although they do not have political rights like voting and obtaining dual citizenship. Men and women labourers are both engaged in sites of construction, whereas women also work in beauty parlours, domestic spaces and as porters. The majority of the seasonal, floating wage labourers belong to poverty-stricken remote areas of Nepal (Okhaldunga, Charikot, Khotang, Udaipur, Dolakha), who seasonally migrate to urban spaces of Darjeeling to earn a livelihood for better lives. They mostly belong to agrarian families, who return to Nepal with the onset of the harvesting season, (for example *Asaar*- harvesting season according to the Nepali calendar, that falls in June).

**As capital emigrates, workers follow:** A historical continuity and connection lies between the mobility of labour (forced or aspirational) and the colonial transformation of Darjeeling

into a hill sanatorium and contemporarily into an urban space. **The historical circuit of labour continues to operate but differentiates at this juncture-** In contrast to earlier forms of labour migrations during the colonial period and after the formation of Indian modern territorial state, the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty, a political arrangement, allowed the floating of "citizens" from both sides of the political boundaries whose distinctive characteristic was migration in 'search for work rather than in search of land and other agricultural activities. This form of migration in search of work is in a circular fashion. Jaytee too contends that these movements from Nepal are best characterised as circulatory rather than migratory to start with'(Encounters, 2016). Dominantly the seasonal migrants hail from the far west; the poorest and least fertile part of Nepal'. There has been a huge literature (Middleton T, 2018) (Shneiderman, 2015) (Hutt ) (Subba, T:2008) (Pradhan, K ) (Besky. S, 2013) (Sharma, J :2016) (Sen,D ) (Gurung, T 2009) (Dhakal, R.P 2009) and others that engage with labour mobility from Nepal to India. But little work has been done on circular migrants. Of particular note is Sarah Shneiderman who in her book, *Rituals of Ethnicity* highlights the pragmatics of 'Thangmis' crossing borders, circular migration and their engagement in translational aspects of belonging to multiple nation-states. In her ethnographic work, she highlights that the 'defined and constrained framework of belonging is unsettled for those who regularly cross national borders' (Shneiderman, 2015). Also, along with the general gap in the literature on circular migration, literature on circular migrants / seasonal migrant labours is scant.

As Zygmunt Bauman highlights tourism and vagrancy are two sides of the same coin of global migration but not all migrants are alike in their movement as they may experience different social conditions. Tourists may travel for the global chase of profit or leisure purposes whereas the vagabond (migrant wage labour) must move wherever capital demands labour'. These movements/mobility themselves lead to exclusion from political, juridical, economic and social status.

The purpose of this research is to understand (and add to the existing literature) the lived experiences of circular/seasonal migrant labourers living at the edges of the state. How in these precarious conditions do they engage with the logic of the modern territorial states that govern though marking its members as citizens and non-members as non-citizens. How various forms of infrastructure have attracted these mobile labours across political boundaries. Also, it tries to understand how they exercise their agency if there is any? The research will be conducted in Darjeeling and parts of Nepal through non-participant observation, following the ethnographic method.

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