

The seasonal mobile labourers living on the edges of the state

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Abstract

The district of Kalimpong and Darjeeling is an important destination for seasonal labouring bodies (population) that hail from remote pockets of rural Nepal. They are a population of unskilled labourers who seasonally cross the porous political boundaries of Nepal and India to work at construction sites, in domestic spaces and informal sectors of these Urban spaces. This paper tries to highlight the historical and contemporary circuit of labour mobility and how the labour of these mobile labouring bodies (population) has produced and reproduced these Urban spaces that are commodified and consumed globally. Irrespective of it, how these labouring bodies are depoliticised and socially invisibilized by the structures of global capitalism and the modern state. Further, how do they negotiate their conditions of precarity with the state and market forces?

Introduction:

In Kalimpong, the sun has set and the cicadas make their presence felt through their sounds in the dark while I walk the narrow rough road towards the labour camp (dera). The camp consists of multiple rooms made of tin sheets, bamboo and wood with a tin roof on the top, making the sound “clang, clang” with every stroke of a strong breeze. A bulb hangs on a thin electric wire that passes through a tin roof lightening up the small tiny rooms for a few hours where the seasonal guests make the most of it, some cook their meals on wood and some suffice themselves with fruits at the end of the day. Like every other night, the strong smell of cooked meals and the smoke of burning wood fills the air. As I reach there I hear some men quarrelling in their tiny room. One of them says “give me hundred rupees, I need the money to buy food!” The other responded in a similar tone “I do not have money or else I would have repaid it to you”. The quarrel goes on for some time until Rahpal’s inmate agrees to repay him the hundred rupees. One of them walks out of the room and then Rahpal walks out too. Taken by surprise to see me there at that hour, he takes me to his room where four of them adjust themselves in the tiny room. Rahpal says “that some of them in the dera has already left for their home in Nepal and some of us like me have stayed here at Kalimpong despite our willingness to go back home to celebrate Dasain, we were not able to earn much so we stayed back. Hopefully, we might go home during Tihar” (Diwali). It is almost November now and Tihar has already ended, Rahpal and his contemporaries are still here in Kalimpong with their namlos that help them to carry the load on their backs and earn a living. Rahpal is a seasonal mobile daily wage labourer who has travelled from He continues, “At the age of twelve years, I stole a minimum amount from my parent's savings box for my journey to Kalimpong and I stayed hungry for two nights assuming that the money would fall short to cover my travel expenses. While reaching Kalimpong I worked as a porter at the haat bazaar where the weekly market is organised. I struggled to carry the heavy loads until my body shivered due to work. The shopkeepers in a dominating tone used to call me “Phuchey

(smallly) and order me to work at a minimum wage. Now after some Years, I am no longer Phuchey and can carry heavy loads and also say “No” (deny) work when needed”.

In between all these years, Rahpal has travelled back and forth to Nepal (..) and Kalimpong. Like him, many others follow this pattern of mobility across the porous political boundaries of contemporary Nepal and India. Most of them are peasants who engage in farming activities for a few months and seasonally migrate to Urban spaces to work as wage labour. As the 1950 Indo-Nepal friendship treaty allows the free movement of people, the nearest Urban spaces like Darjeeling and Sikkim have been regular sites of workplaces for them. This labour population comprises both women and men that are found in groups in several pockets of the town and in almost every lane where unskilled labour like carrying loads seems necessary.

Given the geographical structuring of the hills, the roads have not been able to connect every nook and corner of the hills, thus making manual labour necessary to reproduce the city. If a woman carrying a heavy load on her back with her child tied to her breast walking behind a group of tourists is a common sight in Darjeeling the same sight is absent here in Kalimpong where the major workforce comprises men in Kalimpong, although women engage in construction sites and domestic spaces. The presence of a plantation in Darjeeling and the absence of it in Kalimpong hints at the reasons behind it but that is altogether another topic to be dealt with.

Literature gap

Many authors (see Shneiderman 2015, Hutt 1997, Middleton 2018, Subba 2018, Pradhan 1982, Besky 2013, Sharma 2016, Sen 2012, Gurung 2009, Dhakal 2009, Pradhan 2022) have engaged with different aspects of labour mobility from Nepal to India, only a few like Shneiderman, Sharma has engaged in work on circular migration and circular migrants who float back and forth through this porous political boundary of Nepal and India. Shneiderman (2015) looks into the pragmatics of the Thangmi border crossing in the three regions of Tibet, Nepal and India floating in a circular fashion or engaged in circular migration. The defined and constrained aspect of belonging is unsettled for the ones who regularly cross national borders”.

Sharma also highlights the circular aspect of mobility when he mentions that the earlier phase of migration took place when people moved from contemporary Nepal to Darjeeling hills and North Eastern states of India and also to Burma in search of land and fleeing oppressive tax, labour demands, kinship ties and caste hierarchies” but more to do with oppressive monarchical rule and the second one is to do with the circular fashion of mobility (circular migration) where people cross political boundaries in search of work in the Urban spaces rather than in search of land. Further, Ahuti argues that “the mobility pattern is conditioned by class character where the most affluent of all travel to the European and American cities, the second affluent travel to the middle east and the third affluent travel to South Asian countries (Malaysia) particularly India" but the lowest rung in the class hierarchy travel to nearby hill stations of India, particularly, Darjeeling hills, Sikkim,... and coal mines

factories in the North Eastern part of India, a periphery to periphery mobility. They work in the informal sectors of Urban spaces and are unskilled. My site of study is Kalimpong where through inductive qualitative research I attempt to understand the lived experiences of these mobile labouring bodies in the Urban spaces of Kalimpong and how they interact and negotiate with the structural violence thrust upon them by capitalism and the structure of the modern state.

Nature of Labour

This entire colonial construction of Darjeeling and Kalimpong as the actualisation of the Victorian design was a violent process conditioned by the interplay of governance, capital and labour. The transformation of the pre-colonial spaces of Darjeeling and Kalimpong required an immense amount of labour which the then-native population could not suffice neither “were some of the Lepcha cultivators interested in arduous labouring jobs, as they made adequate earnings from the forest and commons (Sharma). “New labourers were required for actualisation of this Victorian design resulting in a new process of proletarianisation in the region where “officials tapped a growing pool of waged labour from ecologically marginal mountain lands of contemporary Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim”. Catchphrases like “Chiya ko butta ma paisa falcha” (money grows on tea leaves) enriched the imagination of individuals aspiring for a better life from that of the oppressive feudal and monarchical rule and oppressive social order that prevailed in marginal mountain lands only to figure out later that it required labour to pluck the tea leaves to earn daily wages. But apart from that, the colonial spaces offered new jobs in domestic spaces of households, hotels and army recruitment. This pool of waged labourers was negotiated and manipulated into the labour market for the imperial capitalist expansion of these leisurely spaces of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Sharma calls this production of leisurely spaces of Darjeeling Himalayan (Kalimpong) laboured-upon spaces which were burdened upon the intense exploitation of subaltern bodies or coolie proletariats (Sharma). New employment opportunities opened up in an Urban settlement, Darjeeling’s plantation and military cantonments As Sharma states that “the plains servant was seen as ill-equipped to deal with hill station life, where the Nepali labour was seen as the best group for diligence, cleanliness and housekeeping virtues, with Lepcha a close second. The army recruitment in Jalpahar cantonment in 1890 where Nepali men aspired and gave preference to military openings deserting the plantation and domestic jobs” (Sharma). Nepali Women were mostly recruited in the plantation economy as they were seen as loyal workers and faithful to their domestic jobs but also in construction sites and road construction. Apart from employment in these sectors, the geographical feature demanded human conveyance which was fulfilled by the porters who comprised the Himalayan newcomers who immediately needed a wage to survive (Sharma). Further, Sarkar and Khawas engagement with the Nepali Historian Kumar Pradhan shows the interplay of caste, class and ethnicity where the British considered the matwalis (pani chalney jat, alcohol drinkers as positioned in the ritual caste hierarchy) to be mlecchas (barbarians) and where vertical differences between Nepalis and plainsmen based on class, caste, religion, culture and language continued to increase where the educated babus (Bengali elites) and Kaiyas

(money lenders and business owners) continued to consider the labouring Nepalis derogatorily as coolies (Sarkar 2018). This historical process of division of labour based on caste, class, gender and ethnicity has continued to operate in new forms where most of the labour population comprises seasonal mobile labourers. Today, this burden is shared by the seasonal labouring bodies along with the local labouring masses who produce and reproduce the spaces of contemporary Darjeeling Himalayan. It is important to note the character/nature of the labour force can be historically traced back to the colonial construction of spaces and docile bodies where work in the colonial labour market was differentiated based on gender, class, caste and ethnicity.

Kalimpong; a shadow place within a shadow place

However, Kalimpong and Darjeeling share a history of colonial construction of leisurely space for white bodies. To be precise and particular the colonial construction of Darjeeling was to make it a summer capital with a plantation economy where the white bodies could escape from the heat of the plains and earn profit from the plantation whereas Kalimpong developed a little later. As Sarah Besky highlights why Kalimpong was colonially constructed as a hill station. She states that “tensions between the drive to maximise plantation profits, ensure social order and to improve population met with the demand of the growing white population in the hill stations of Darjeeling and Kurseong for ready access to familiar fruits and vegetables. This problem of how to feed the plantation and the seasonal administrative class was only met with the annexation of Bhutan and British expansion to the Northeastern frontiers. And to resolve this tension the plantation required a productive, governable and settled outside and it is here that Kalimpong across the Teesta river addressed this tension. Concluding that small-scale agriculture could address the food provision question. Kalimpong, a new hill station akin to Darjeeling became the “outside of the plantation” which was necessary to feed both the plantation and seasonal administrative class.

The contemporary Darjeeling hills when viewed from the touristic gaze it has gained a reputation as one of the best tourist destinations at least in North Bengal, where the lush tea gardens, the toy trains, the Kanchenjunga at the backdrop and the homestays in the entire hills are visited and consumed globally for leisurely purpose. Borrowing the concept of shadow places from Val Plumwood, Besky describes Darjeeling as a shadow place, “they are sites of extraction which are invisible to centres of political and economic power but yet essential to the global circulation of capital”, further “these shadow places are materially and imaginatively oriented to sustenance and enjoyment of others” where the tea grown in the plantation is bidden in distant lands and exclusively consumed by the European and American consumers, the natural mountain vistas are celebrated and consumed by both domestic and foreign tourists and seen as a place of attachment. Whereas the Indian Gorkhas struggle to make claims of their belonging within the Indian nation-state. In Besky’s term, Darjeeling is a celebrated place of beauty for some, a place of extraction and a place of displacement for some. The commodified landscape of Darjeeling hills is globally consumed

and extracted but this (re)production of these commodified spaces is not possible without the labour of the Indian Gorkhas and the labouring bodies of seasonal mobile labourers from Nepal who comprise the workforce.

Although the above analysis not only specifically deals with Urban spaces of Darjeeling but with the entire hills but to make it more particular and precise, Kalimpong as a hill station developed as an 'outside to the plantation' (Besky) which in many ways acts as a shadow place in relations to Darjeeling.

Kalimpong as “Namlo bokeyra gari Khaney jaga”

If *Chiya ko butta ma paisa falcha* was a catchphrase that fueled the imagination of Muglan and lured aspiring individuals to a better life, the contemporary catchphrase has been “Kalimpong-namlo bokeyra gari khaney jaga” (a place to earn a living). There are lived experiences of the labouring bodies who have been considered dead or lost by their family members back at home while they engaged in (re)producing the shadow place to earn a secure income (precarity trap). Not only that, but it also acts as a space where some come for medical check-ups and meanwhile work as potters in the Urban space of Kalimpong. There is a labour population who have worked in Malaysia, and Qatar (Middle east) countries and also in coal mines in the northeastern state of India and have come back to work in Kalimpong after their visa expired and due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jantarey Dai:

Makes sense of Kalimpong in this way “I travelled from Diktel to Kalimpong with a group of men (relatives, friends) who lured me with the *opportunity to work* in the orange field. We walked for six days to reach the Teesta river. I came here in the year Indira Gandhi died (was killed in 1984). We worked in the orange field for some years and then left it due to the oppressive sardari system that operated there. The Sardar used to sit in the middle with thirty or forty labourers and would grant labourers to do the labour work assigned to them. Labour had to take permission to engage in work. The Sardar used to charge the amount from the customers for our labour and at the end of the day, they used to pay a minimum wage. Wage labour came only through the Sardar. So we left the orange field and came to Kalimpong in search of work. In Kalimpong, we worked on the orange field, agricultural lands and in the *haat*. We used to carry *dhan* and other products and reach the haat from remote villages. Kalimpong was free from the Sardari system that operated in the orange fields and we could work here according to our wishes. It has been almost thirty-five years since I first came here and since then I have been travelling back to Diktel during the farming season (cultivation and harvesting) and travelling back here again during the non-farming season. Earlier the labour work was to deliver the dhan, oranges and other vegetables from remote villages to the haat but it is recently that we have been loading and unloading the trucks and working at construction sites”.

Hinting at the infrastructural change Antaray dai's everyday life suggests how his labouring body has been engaged in this (re)production of these shadow places (urban spaces) and how his return to Diktel (the rural village) during the farming season has provided him with livelihood security and non-wage income which has subsidised the labour reproduction cost for capital. Generating and sustaining a flexible labour force for capitalist development through reproducing these labouring bodies for capital generation. (Zhan and Scully)

While interacting with a group of seasonal labourers who are waiting for work in their regular stand. They informed me that they are compelled to come and work here to earn a living despite owning land and cultivating crops. There is no market from which they can sustain themselves and farming has just been for self-consumption and self-sustenance. Although *dhan*, millet and corn are grown, it is insufficient to feed on that for which they have to take loans from the "sau" / malik or small business owners or shopkeepers, putting them into debt. Most have travelled to Kalimpong to repay their debts which they borrowed either to build houses or for food and other essentials. Our Nepali brothers have not begged to earn a living but through "parishram" hard work and manual labour has been one of the instruments to earn a living. It is since our forefather's time that we have been following this pattern of mobile work. *"This form of circular migration has long been a part of household survival strategies, with those capable of eating outside absenting themselves for six to eight months of the year"* (Sharma J).

Unlike other places in Kalimpong, we have the freedom to work according to our wishes and earn our daily wages whereas in factories and other foreign places we have to work under the order of someone for a routine hour. (focusing on the informal sector). But despite this when our neighbours ask our parents, "Where is your son?" and when they learn that we work here in Kalimpong, they express their dissatisfaction by saying "Ayy thukai, Kalimpong!" Kalimpong is a (*dukha gari khaney* place) where you work hard as a labour and earn a living. If you tell the neighbours that you have gone there to work in the office (*computer chalawney thau*), no one will believe you.

We have worked in many places like constructing buildings and roads but many times the thekedar has not paid our wages and when we ask them, they blatantly ignore us. We have built this place through our labour but the labourers themselves do not exist for them (*astitva chaina*)

What is the analysis of the above ethnography? What should the reader take from this

Shadow places are sites of extraction, it sustains themselves on this invisibilized labour of labouring bodies of the mobile population where informal labour markets produce conditions of precarity to produce capital on labour's exploitation. In the neoliberal era, mobile labouring bodies like that of Raphal and his contemporaries often find wage income insufficient to bear the expenses in these Urban spaces. As the daily wage only covers their

subsistence (food, clothing, shelter) to reproduce their labouring body to work in the labour market. Compelling them to work in this informal economy to earn a living and depending on non-wage income through agriculture in their village. The mobile labouring bodies experience more intensified conditions of precarity due to their mobile character and nexus between state and capital where they are deprived of community support and political and social exclusions.

A search for a dignified life in conditions of precarity

Mahesh continues

Coolie: The term coolie is derogatory and if that is used in Kathmandu to refer to us then surely the person will be beaten up but here, we are termed and referred to as coolies! Once one of the customers said “Ayy coolies have come here because they did not get food to eat there”, It pained me so much that I never felt like coming to this place ever again. And some even beat us up. The other adds “the coolie term is bad and the usage of it to refer to us leaves us with a sense of humiliation, they tell us “ayy didn’t you find any work there that you have come here to steal?” Phrases like “Ayy *jhata* coolie" is commonly used here” I preferred to be called a labour rather than a being called a coolie, the term coolie is a Gali.

Rahpal:

Manchey ko ijjat thulo!

Some Customers behaviour when we deny work is “the traders don’t hurl abuses on us but they cut down rates. The customers behave offensively, “will you carry this load at this price or not? If not, “*jhatha*, why did you come here to India to work with your namlo, don’t carry it”. Raphal “it is not only his place to say this if it is so then he shouldn’t allow Nepali to enter this place. It is necessary to learn all languages, these customers and shop owners hurl abuse at us in different languages, Bihari, Nepali, and English. Ramashanker hurled abuses at me while I was carrying heavy loads and I retaliated saying “I have carried eight heavy loads from the truck to your godown, If you don’t want to pay me for my labour, you don’t do so but don’t hurl abuses on me. Abuses are common here and if one does not understand this then one cannot survive this place”.

Mahesh and Rahpal both seek dignity and respect in these labouring spaces but their demand for such human values is beyond their control. This mobile labouring population has been a victim of the nexus of capital and the form of the modern state. Labour flows where capital emigrates and these shadow places like (Kalimpong) are the nearest destination that the (rural) labouring population can resort to earn a living which demands them to cross political boundaries. This crossing of the political boundaries causes a certain degree of expulsion - territorial, political, juridical and economic thus positioning these labouring populations in a conditions of precarity where they experience verbal and physical abuse exposing them to violence, injury and death (Butler).

A shopkeeper in the haat bazar who is an active member of the local haat shares her experience with the dais. Many of the dais have fallen sick and also died here in some godown. One of them passed away at my stall due to sickness. Whatever it is, they are coolies who work hard to carry loads. So I along with a few shopkeepers collected and arranged the body for the funeral as they have no guardians or relatives. Apart from that we have always collected money and helped them out in times of crisis. Since they have no one here we try to collectively help them out. We were also unaware that if we inform the police station about these deaths, they would do the needful.

Suggesting the invisibilisation of labour and conditions of precarity which is thrust upon them due to the intersections of the capital and form of the modern state. As Butler suggests Political orders and social and economic institutions are designed not only to make sure that housing and food are available to its population but life itself is made secure but still conditions of precarity exist. It is so due to the given structure of the Westphalian nation-state as equality of opportunity, equal access to resources, as well as equal participation in the political community, is entitled to citizen subjects (Fraser) where this mobile labouring population who cross political boundaries is misrepresented as failed citizens (Nail) when looked from the static lens of the modern territorial states. As modern territorial states mark their population as members by recognising them as a political member through citizenship who is entitled to political rights and social justice. But the mobile labouring population is excluded from the domain of political participation, social equality and social justice since they are not the national citizenry of the laboured spaces of shadow place. Along with Fraser, I ask If injustices do not respect territorial boundaries then why is justice constrained by the territorial boundaries of a modern state? “Is social justice territorial?” Then how do these mobile labouring populations seek to live a life with dignity and respect against the structural violence of the modern state and capital

The idea of Union:

Rahpal and his friends sit in the Kotha and discuss the idea of opening up a union in Kalimpong. Rahpal’s Uncle asks Rahpal “will you take the risk? Can you pay the salary? Can you open up an office?” The other asks “what a union is?” A Sangathan is a collective group of people sharing similar interests clarifying the other ©. They discuss why the union is important. Rahpal says “a union is important because it will at least help someone who is in crisis, there will be a rate for our labour, Rahpal Uncle counters him “how can people from Nepal organise and open up a union, it is not allowed here, we have come here to work for few days and earn money and leave.” Rahpal says “yes we cannot open one but we need links to open it if someone influential (thulo manchey) from here can help then only it is possible to open up a Union. Rahpal friends continue “Irrespective of whether there is a union or not, irrespective of whether we belong to Nepal but what about the labour that we have put in here at this place? We have laboured upon this space, we should have something here.

“Once at a construction site, some labourers were beaten up and we went to the police station to file a complaint but the one in charge asked us to bring more people and if you do so we will take out a notice stating an order that “A Labour can work according to one’s wish and should not be forced to work against his will”. I tried to organise the labourers but as I reached from one point to the other they had already disappeared. They feared that once you organise today and make demands the other day the locals would beat you up. The one who was beaten up and wounded continued to work with blood stains”. What can you do in (aru ko thau) other’s place, in other’s place there is no samaj for us”. (Jantarey)

When asked informally by one of the veteran leaders of CPIM, he informs me that “no political party is interested in them as they do not comprise the vote banks, they have come here to work and will leave in time”.

Although there had been a provision where registration of labourers from Nepal was carried out but it disappeared in thin air.

Apart from the limitation of the modern territorial state to provide equal rights and political participation to these labouring bodies, they have tried to engage and negotiate with the state but have utterly failed as their character of mobility has not structurally allowed them to politically organise and form associations and negotiate with the state thus positioning them under the intertwined structural violence of injustices by modern state and capital.

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