



Between Livelihood and Belonging: Migration Trajectories of Nepalese Migrants in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT: *Nepalese migration to India has a long history, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the experiences of semi-permanent migrants who spend substantial portions of their lives at the destination while retaining strong social and emotional connections with Nepal. This paper examines the migration trajectories of semi-permanent Nepalese migrants in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, with particular attention to the causes of migration, migration pathways, social networks, employment strategies, occupational mobility, and future aspirations. The paper is based on in-depth interviews and field observations conducted in Shimla and surrounding areas between 2023 and 2026. It argues that Nepalese migration to Shimla cannot be understood solely as distress migration. Although poverty, debt, food insecurity, limited employment opportunities, and political insecurity often initiate migration, migration gradually becomes a longer-term livelihood strategy through which migrants seek economic security and upward mobility. The expansion of Himachal Pradesh's horticultural and construction economies has created sustained demand for migrant labour, while kinship networks and labour contractors facilitate migrants' entry into the labour market. Over time, some migrants move from insecure daily-wage work into skilled employment, contracting, business, and government service. Yet economic incorporation does not necessarily produce social integration. Despite decades of residence in Shimla, many migrants continue to experience occupational stereotyping and social marginalisation and retain a strong desire to return to Nepal. Their experience is therefore characterised by a persistent tension between economic dependence on the destination and emotional, social, and aspirational attachment to the place of origin.*

KEYWORDS: *Nepalese migrants, semi-permanent migration, Shimla, labour migration, social networks, horticulture, occupational mobility, belonging*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Migration between Nepal and India is a longstanding phenomenon shaped by geographical proximity, historical connections, porous borders, and differences in employment opportunities. Nepalese migrants have become an important part of India's informal and low-wage labour markets, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, portage, and security services. Despite their substantial contribution to local economies, many remain socially and economically vulnerable.

Within this broader pattern, migration to Himachal Pradesh presents an important but relatively underexplored case. The expansion of horticulture, particularly apple cultivation, alongside construction and urban development, has generated sustained demand for migrant labour. Nepalese workers have consequently become an important component of the state's labour force. They are found not only in rural apple orchards but also in towns and cities, where they work in construction, portage, restaurants, transportation, vending, domestic work, and other occupations.

This paper focuses specifically on semi-permanent Nepalese migrants in Shimla. The distinction between seasonal and semi-permanent migrants is important because the two groups experience migration differently. Seasonal migrants generally move between Nepal and India according to fluctuations in employment and household needs, whereas semi-permanent migrants remain at the destination for extended periods, often bring their families with them, develop relatively stable occupations, and establish social and economic networks in the destination.

The paper asks four principal questions: Why do Nepalese migrants leave Nepal? How do they reach and establish themselves in Shimla? How do they negotiate the local labour market and improve their livelihoods? And why do many continue to imagine Nepal as their ultimate place of settlement despite spending decades in Shimla?

The central argument is that Nepalese migration to Shimla represents a transition from distress-driven mobility to strategic livelihood migration. Economic hardship often provides the initial impetus, but migration subsequently becomes an instrument for achieving broader aspirations, including debt repayment, education, housing, land purchase, business formation, and future migration. Social networks are central to this process, facilitating access to employment and accommodation and reducing the risks associated with migration. At the same time, migrants' economic incorporation into Shimla does not necessarily result in social or cultural integration. They remain strongly attached to Nepal and frequently perceive their presence in Shimla as economically necessary but socially conditional. Their migration can therefore be understood through the tension between livelihood at the destination and belonging at the place of origin.

II. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this paper are based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Shimla town and surrounding areas between 2023 and 2026. The research employed in-depth personal interviews and observation to understand the lived experiences of Nepalese migrants. Respondents included semi-permanent migrants engaged in construction, horticulture, photography, contracting, transportation, government employment, restaurants, and other occupations, as well as individuals with long histories of migration between Nepal and India.

The study also draws on conversations with individuals familiar with the migration and employment experiences of Nepalese workers, including government officials and members of Nepalese migrant organisations. Particular attention was paid to migrants' migration histories, first occupations, methods of finding work, role of family and community networks, occupational mobility, experiences of discrimination, and future plans.

The paper uses the category of semi-permanent migrant to describe Nepalese migrants who have lived and worked in Himachal Pradesh for extended periods but have not necessarily acquired Indian citizenship or permanently severed their links with Nepal. This category is analytically useful because such migrants occupy an intermediate position between seasonal mobility and permanent settlement.

III. LABOUR DEMAND AND THE TRANSFORMATION IN HIMACHAL'S ECONOMY

The migration of Nepalese workers to Himachal Pradesh must be understood within the state's broader economic transformation. Himachal Pradesh's mountainous geography has historically constrained large-scale industrial development. As Chand (1996) argues, agriculture and allied activities therefore became particularly important for employment and income generation. Given the limited potential for conventional industrialisation, diversification towards high-value horticultural crops provided an alternative route to economic development.

The expansion of horticulture after the 1950s transformed the rural economy of Himachal Pradesh. Traditional subsistence agriculture increasingly gave way to commercial cultivation, particularly fruit production. According to the Himachal Pradesh Economic Survey (2025–26), the area under horticultural crops increased from 792 hectares in 1950–51 to 2,37,368 hectares in 2024–25. Apple cultivation expanded from merely 400 hectares in 1950–51 to 1,16,338 hectares in 2024–25 and accounted for 77.58 per cent of total fruit production in 2024–25.

Shimla occupies a particularly important position in this transformation. Along with Kullu, Kinnaur, parts of Mandi, and Lahaul-Spiti, it has become one of the major apple-producing regions of the country. Horticulture brought considerable economic prosperity to many rural households, but it also transformed local labour relations.

Kaisth (1993) argues that the commercialisation of agriculture weakened traditional caste-based labour arrangements and encouraged the expansion of cash-based wage labour. Fruit cultivation required considerably more labour than the earlier subsistence economy could provide. As a result, a labour shortage emerged in horticultural regions, creating opportunities for migrants.

Nepalese workers became particularly important in filling this gap. They entered occupations that were physically demanding, and socially devalued among sections of the local population. Brusle (2007) describes this as a process of labour substitution in which Nepalese migrants occupy employment niches increasingly avoided by local workers.

Apple cultivation provides a clear example. Semi-permanent Nepalese workers are employed as orchard caretakers, sometimes living with their families in small settlements within or near orchards. Seasonal workers arrive in large numbers during the harvesting period, particularly between June and August, and undertake

picking, packing, loading, and transportation. Thus, Nepalese labour has become embedded in different stages of the horticultural production process.

The dependence on migrant labour is also a reminder that technological change has not eliminated the significance of human labour in the Himalayan economy. The terrain and dispersed nature of agricultural production continue to make manual labour indispensable.

The horticultural transformation has nevertheless had environmental consequences. The conversion of agricultural and forest land for orchards, deforestation, pressure on water resources, soil degradation, and pesticide use have generated concerns (Chand, 1996). Cases involving forest encroachment and the establishment of orchards have also required judicial intervention and HC ordered removal of apple orchards from forest lands (Parashar, 2025). Thus, the apple economy represents both an important source of prosperity and a source of ecological pressure also.

For the purposes of migration analysis, however, its most significant consequence is the creation of a sustained demand for labour. This demand provides an important structural explanation for the continued presence of Nepalese migrants in Himachal Pradesh.

IV. FROM SEASONAL MOBILITY TO SEMI-PERMANENT MIGRATION

Nepalese migrants in Himachal Pradesh are not a homogeneous population. Broadly, three categories can be identified. The first consists of permanent settlers who have acquired Indian citizenship and are generally described as Indians of Nepali origin. The second consists of semi-permanent migrants who have lived in India for long periods but retain Nepali citizenship. The third consists of seasonal migrants who regularly move between Nepal and India.

Seasonal migrants, often referred to as Ghumphir, usually work as daily-wage labourers, porters, construction workers, domestic workers, restaurant workers, and watchmen. Their migration is often closely linked to rural poverty, food insecurity, inadequate agricultural opportunities, and the need for cash income (Gill, 2003). They tend to retain flexibility because their household responsibilities and economic circumstances require periodic movement between the two countries.

Semi-permanent migrants, by contrast, generally have more stable employment. They may bring their spouses and children to the destination, establish businesses, develop long-term relationships with employers, and become increasingly embedded in local institutions. Their migration therefore differs from purely seasonal mobility.

This distinction is significant because much of the literature on Nepalese migration to India has concentrated on short-term or seasonal migration, while relatively less attention has been paid to migrants who remain at destinations for decades (Subedi, 2015). The semi-permanent migrant occupies a particularly interesting position: economically settled but not necessarily socially integrated; physically distant from Nepal but emotionally connected to it.

In Shimla, semi-permanent migrants are present across a range of occupations and localities. A rough field-based estimate suggests that several thousand such migrants reside in Shimla town and surrounding areas. Unlike many seasonal workers, they are relatively organised and interact more frequently with government institutions and local authorities. Several organisations representing Nepalese residents operate in Shimla, including Nepali Samaj Bharat, Mulprabh Akhil Bharat Nepali Ekta Samaj, and the Gorkha Student Association. These organisations raise issues relating to the rights and welfare of Nepalese migrants and also organise cultural activities, particularly festivals such as Teej. Their presence indicates that semi-permanent migrants have developed forms of collective organisation that are less visible among short-term workers.

V. WHY DO THEY MIGRATE? DISTRESS, ASPIRATION AND NETWORKS

The decision to migrate rarely has a single cause. The interviews indicate that economic hardship, debt, limited agricultural opportunities, unemployment, food insecurity, political insecurity, and the desire for higher income all contribute to migration.

For migrants from Nepal's far-western regions in particular, migration is often initially distress-driven. Tiram Lal, a contractor in Mehli, explained that debt and food insecurity made it difficult for his family to survive in Nepal. Ravinder Karki similarly migrated with his wife because his family could not repay its debts through the limited employment opportunities available at home.

These accounts demonstrate the importance of economic push factors. However, the field evidence also shows that migration cannot be reduced to poverty alone.

Among young migrants, migration may be encouraged by what can be termed "youthful romanticism." Returnee migrants often display new clothes, accessories, and other symbols associated with urban prosperity. Such displays can create an idealised image of life in India. Ram Bahadur recalled migrating as a teenager because he was fascinated by the lifestyle of returnee migrants. Hemant Kumar similarly observed that young people were often influenced by migrants who returned home presenting an exaggerated picture of their lives abroad.

The experience of first-time migrants often challenges these expectations. Interviews with young migrants near Jabli revealed that several had come to India primarily to experience migrant life. After encountering wage disputes, insecurity, and difficult living conditions, some reconsidered their decision. One young respondent, Nikhil, described migrant life as far more difficult than he had imagined and expressed a desire to return to Nepal and resume his education.

This contrast between imagined and experienced migration is significant. Migration is often initiated through representations of opportunity, but actual experiences at the destination can lead to disappointment and return.

For semi-permanent migrants, however, the trajectory is different. Initial migration may be motivated by hardship, but over time migration becomes a strategy for achieving broader economic objectives. Once immediate needs such as debt repayment or food security are addressed, migrants begin pursuing longer-term goals: constructing houses, purchasing land, educating children, establishing businesses, or financing future migration.

Chander's experience illustrates this transformation. He initially left Nepal because of political violence and insecurity during the Maoist insurgency. Over time, he established a successful construction business in Shimla. His children are studying abroad, he has purchased land in Nepal, and he plans to establish a business there. Yet he continues to work in Shimla because of the economic networks and opportunities he has developed.

Migration therefore changes meaning over the course of a migrant's life. What begins as a response to necessity can become a deliberate strategy for economic advancement.

VI. NETWORKS AND THE MAKING OF MIGRATION PATHWAYS

Migration is rarely an entirely individual decision. Social networks significantly influence where migrants go, whom they work for, where they live, and how they cope with the initial uncertainties of migration.

The field evidence indicates that Nepalese migrants reach Himachal Pradesh through two principal mechanisms: personal and community networks, and labour contractors. Kinship and village networks are particularly important during the initial stages. A relative, friend, or acquaintance already living in Shimla can provide information about employment and accommodation and reduce the risks involved in migration. Labour contractors play a particularly significant role in horticulture and construction. Sharma (2016) notes that contractors from the mid-western and far-western regions of Nepal frequently recruit groups of workers and bring them to Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Such recruitment networks effectively connect labour-surplus areas in Nepal with labour-demanding sectors in India.

Hemant Kumar's migration trajectory illustrates how these networks operate. He initially came to Jubbhal because his father and elder brother had previously worked there. After moving between Jubbhal, Rampur, and Shimla and experimenting with several occupations, he eventually learned photography in a local studio and established himself as an independent photographer. He later brought his brother to Shimla and helped him enter the same occupation. This case shows that networks do more than facilitate initial migration. They also enable occupational mobility and family reunification. Once migrants become established, they develop their own networks and become sources of information and employment for subsequent migrants.

Networks therefore reproduce migration across generations and communities. A migrant who initially depends on an established networks, may eventually become a contractor, employer, or recruiter and facilitate the migration of others. Migration thus becomes a cumulative process.

VII. ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET AND MOVING UPWARD

The employment trajectories of Nepalese migrants reveal a gradual movement through different occupations. Most semi-permanent migrants interviewed began as unskilled workers. Their first jobs were generally characterised by low wages, insecurity, long working hours, and physically demanding conditions.

Apple orchards and construction sites serve as major entry points into the local labour market. Migrants may subsequently move into skilled occupations, contracting, transportation, small businesses, government employment, or other relatively secure activities.

The career of Thegender Pangeni illustrates this trajectory. He left Nepal as a teenager and worked in Delhi as a daily-wage labourer, cook, and domestic helper before joining a construction company as a supervisor. He eventually secured government employment in Himachal Pradesh. His experience demonstrates how migrants can acquire skills through successive occupations and gradually move towards greater employment security. Such trajectories challenge the idea that Nepalese migrants remain permanently trapped in unskilled labour. Although many remain in low-paid occupations, others use the initial labour market as a platform for occupational advancement.

The construction sector provides particularly visible examples. Nepalese workers are employed in road construction, building projects, infrastructure development, and other forms of manual work. The work is often physically dangerous, poorly paid, and undertaken with inadequate safety measures. Yet some workers eventually become skilled masons, supervisors, contractors, or recruiters. And the emergence of Nepalese contractors is

particularly significant. Migrants who began their careers as labourers sometimes establish their own labour networks and take contracts from larger Indian contractors. In Shimla, this arrangement is locally described as the Petti System, and Nepalese intermediaries are commonly known as Petti Thekedars.

Chander's trajectory illustrates this form of mobility. He arrived as a construction labourer, acquired masonry skills, and gradually began taking small contracts. Over time, he developed a reputation and secured larger projects. He eventually employed dozens of Nepalese workers and became an important intermediary between larger contractors and migrant labour.

Jokhi Ram followed a similar trajectory. After arriving in Shimla at a very young age, he worked in a series of low-status occupations, including grazing donkeys, portering, and construction work. He eventually became a successful contractor and later entered transportation.

These cases reveal that migrant labour markets can provide pathways for upward mobility, although such mobility requires considerable time, skill acquisition, social networks, and entrepreneurial capacity.

VIII. FROM ROAD BUILDERS TO URBAN SERVICE PROVIDERS

The contribution of Nepalese labour to Himachal Pradesh extends beyond the contemporary horticultural and construction sectors. Nepalese workers played a significant role in the expansion of road infrastructure after Independence. Because of its difficult terrain, Himachal Pradesh placed considerable emphasis on road construction during its early development. Nepalese workers were extensively employed by the Public Works Department because the work required physically demanding labour in difficult environments. Ram Bahadur, who worked for more than two decades in the HPPWD, recalled that Nepalese workers were recruited relatively easily for road construction in the early decades after Independence. He also recalled the dangers associated with the work and the deaths of Nepalese labourers during the construction of roads, including the Hindustan-Tibet Road. The Jeori Memorial Park in Shimla district commemorates workers who lost their lives during the construction of this historic road. The memorial provides a physical reminder of a largely unacknowledged contribution of migrant labour to the development of Himalayan infrastructure.

Technological change has subsequently reduced the demand for manual road labour. Government recruitment has also changed. According to an official associated with the Municipal Corporation Shimla, Nepalese workers once occupied a significant number of lower-level positions in the Municipal Corporation and PWD. Retirement and the expansion of outsourced employment have substantially reduced their presence in direct government employment.

This shift illustrates a broader transformation in the migrant labour market. Migrants who were once recruited directly by state institutions are no more incorporated there or has increasingly being employed through contractors and private intermediaries. At the same time, local preference in outsourced recruitment has made direct entry into government employment more difficult for outsiders.

Nevertheless, Nepalese migrants remain visible in the urban informal economy. They work in dhabas, momo stalls, domestic services, transportation, vending, portering, and small businesses. Their presence is woven into everyday urban life, even though their contribution is often taken for granted.

IX. ECONOMIC INCORPORATION WITHOUT SOCIAL INTEGRATION

One of the most significant findings of the study is the gap between economic incorporation and social integration. Nepalese migrants perform numerous activities essential to everyday life in Shimla. They carry goods, load and unload materials, deliver essential commodities, work in construction, maintain orchards, run food establishments, and provide domestic and transport services. Their labour is therefore economically valuable. Yet the social status attached to this labour remains low. Certain occupations, especially portering and manual work, are strongly associated with Nepalese migrants. The term "Gorkha" is frequently used to categorise them, sometimes in a derogatory manner. This occupational stereotyping creates a paradox. Migrants are welcomed and needed when they perform physically demanding work, but their social position may remain marginal when they seek recognition beyond that occupational identity.

Several respondents described experiences of humiliation and discrimination. Hemant Kumar argued that migrants are often recognised primarily through their identity as "Gorkhas" rather than as individuals. Jokhi Ram recalled being subjected to derogatory treatment during his childhood because of his Nepalese identity.

These experiences help explain why economic success does not necessarily produce a sense of belonging. Migrants may own vehicles, businesses, and property and employ dozens of workers, yet still feel socially inferior to local residents. The problem, therefore, is not simply one of economic exclusion. It is also one of recognition and dignity. Migrants perceive that their acceptance is conditional upon their continued ability to provide labour. Once they are no longer physically capable of performing such work, they fear that their usefulness—and consequently their social acceptance—will diminish.

This perception has important implications for understanding migrant settlement. Long-term residence does not automatically lead to assimilation. A migrant can spend several decades in a city, contribute substantially

to its economy, raise children there, and develop extensive social networks while still imagining another place as home.

X. COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Semi-permanent migrants also differ from seasonal workers in their degree of collective organisation. Nepalese organisations in Shimla provide platforms through which migrants articulate common interests, maintain cultural identity, and interact with the state.

Organisations such as Nepali Samaj Bharat and other community associations have raised issues concerning employment, welfare, documentation, and migrant rights before government authorities. They also organise cultural and religious events, helping maintain community cohesion. Their political activities are not restricted to Himachal Pradesh only. Some organisations and their leaders also remain involved in political developments in Nepal. The destination therefore becomes more than a workplace; it can serve as a platform for maintaining and extending political networks across borders. This transnational dimension is important. Migrants do not simply move from one political community to another. They continue to participate, directly or indirectly, in social and political processes in Nepal while negotiating their position in India.

Thus, semi-permanent migration creates a form of transnational social existence in which migrants simultaneously inhabit the destination and maintain meaningful connections with the place of origin.

XI. BETWEEN SHIMLA AND NEPAL: FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Despite spending many years in Shimla, most respondents expressed a desire to return to Nepal at some point. Their aspirations can be summarised by the phrase “earn here and invest there.”

The destination is viewed primarily as a source of economic opportunity, while Nepal remains the preferred location for long-term settlement. Migrants use their earnings in Shimla to purchase land, construct houses, repay debts, educate children, establish businesses, and finance future migration. This pattern challenges a straightforward understanding of settlement. A migrant's physical presence in Shimla does not necessarily indicate an intention to permanently settle there. Economic settlement and emotional settlement are not always the same.

For many respondents, Nepal remains associated with family, community, dignity, cultural belonging, and social recognition. Shimla, by contrast, represents employment, income, and opportunity. This distinction becomes particularly visible in migrants' discussions of old age and retirement. Several respondents imagined returning to Nepal once they were no longer economically active. Their aspiration to return was not necessarily based on an immediate intention to leave Shimla but represented a longer-term life plan. The desire to return is therefore both economic and emotional. Migrants wish to benefit from the opportunities available in Shimla while using those benefits to strengthen their position in Nepal.

XII. CONCLUSION

The migration of Nepalese to Shimla is best understood not as a one-way movement from poverty to prosperity, but as a continuing process through which migrants negotiate livelihood, mobility, identity, and belonging. The evidence presented in this paper shows that migration is initially influenced by a combination of economic and social pressures, including poverty, debt, food insecurity, limited agricultural opportunities, unemployment, and political instability. For some young migrants, migration is also shaped by idealised images of life in India and the influence of returnee migrants.

Once migrants reach Shimla, however, their experiences are shaped by the local labour market. The expansion of apple cultivation and construction has created a sustained demand for migrant workers, enabling Nepalese migrants to enter occupations that are physically demanding and often avoided by local workers. Social networks and labour contractors facilitate this entry by connecting migrants with employers, accommodation, and subsequent employment opportunities.

For semi-permanent migrants, migration gradually becomes more than a survival strategy. Through skill acquisition, occupational mobility, entrepreneurship, and social networks, some migrants move from daily-wage work into more secure occupations, including skilled labour, contracting, transportation, small businesses, and government employment. Their trajectories demonstrate that migrant labour markets can provide opportunities for upward economic mobility.

At the same time, economic incorporation has not necessarily resulted in social integration. Nepalese migrants remain strongly associated with manual labour and are sometimes reduced to the identity of the “Gorkha.” Experiences of disrespect and discrimination continue to shape their understanding of belonging. Consequently, migrants may be economically successful and deeply embedded in Shimla's labour market while remaining emotionally and socially oriented towards Nepal.

This produces a central paradox. Nepalese migrants are indispensable to sectors ranging from horticulture and construction to urban services, yet many continue to perceive themselves as outsiders. They build roads,

maintain orchards, construct houses, run restaurants, carry goods, and provide essential services, but their contribution does not always translate into social recognition.

The distinction between seasonal and semi-permanent migration is therefore crucial. Seasonal migrants retain greater mobility and generally respond to immediate household needs, whereas semi-permanent migrants develop long-term livelihoods and organisational structures at the destination. Nevertheless, even semi-permanent migrants often retain a strong orientation towards Nepal. Their migration trajectory is consequently neither complete settlement nor temporary mobility. It is a form of long-term economic incorporation combined with continued transnational belonging. Shimla provides the means through which migrants accumulate economic resources, while Nepal remains the imagined site of long-term security, dignity, and belonging.

The experience of Nepalese migrants in Shimla can therefore be captured through a simple but analytically significant equation: they earn in Shimla but invest, aspire, and ultimately imagine their future in Nepal. Their story is one of economic dependence, occupational mobility, social marginality, and enduring attachment to the place of origin. Understanding this tension between livelihood and belonging is essential to understanding the broader dynamics of Nepalese migration in the Himalayan State.

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