

Migrant construction workers in Bhutan: Understanding Immigrant flows and their perceptions

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I describe, with the help of ethnographic vignettes, the lives and experiences of the Indian migrant labourers working in the construction sector in Bhutan. In so doing, I show how Bhutan has become a ‘place of hope’ for the construction workers, offering them ample reasons to stay on, for the maximum duration they desire. Furthermore, I position my argument in the larger pattern of the plains’ populace mobility into the hills, in their search for ‘new places for their survival’.

Ajay³ is a 26-year-old Bengali migrant from West Bengal, working in one of the construction sites in Thimphu. Ajay came to Bhutan about a year back with a few other migrant construction workers, to commence a ‘secure’ and better-paid employment. While he could have been among the other Indian labourers who migrate to places like Punjab, Haryana, or Kerala, where construction workers are paid much better than in his home state, he came to Bhutan owing to its proximity to West Bengal. ‘I can be home in no time, in any event of emergency’, he reasoned.

Ajay also mentioned the ‘possibility’ of going to other countries. He heard of construction workers being paid ‘very well’ in the Middle East. However, he inferred that ‘it’s a lot of hassle’. Knowing the right contractor is crucial, and many of them are ‘not very reliable’, Ajay said, unlike contractors dealing with construction work in Bhutan. Bhutan also offers him a longer duration of work, with a relatively higher wage rate. In India, he would have been paid on an hourly basis, every day, with no assurance of work the next day.

There are more than 40,000 Indian construction workers like Ajay in Bhutan (MoLHR, 2019, cited in Zangpo, 2020). While the construction sector provides the second-highest share of employment within the country, almost ninety per cent of them are non-Bhutanese (National Statistics Bureau, 2019). This makes Jaquelyn Poussot’s (2018) statement very accurate: ‘Indian labourers are everywhere in Bhutan’. Drawing insights from her fieldwork in 2016, Poussot – a psychologist who was also a researcher while living in Bhutan – remarked that the Indian labourers ‘are faced with social stigma and neglect, along with poor living conditions, but they seem to be happy’ (2018, p. 1). Moreover, she notes, this ‘is the paradox of the invisible class who are, literally, moulding the very landscape of possibility for this country’ (ibid: 3).

Poussot surely made some pertinent observations, yet some of her remarks regarding social stigma and neglect also appear a little impressionistic and anecdotal, with no sufficient data to support her claim. In this article, I describe, through ethnographic vignettes, the lives and experiences of the

³ All the interviewees are anonymized. The names of the construction workers in this paper are pseudonyms.

Indian migrant labourers working in the construction sector in Bhutan. In so doing, I show how Bhutan has become a ‘place of hope’ [similar to Karlsson and Kikon’s (2017) indigenous migrants’ ‘hope’ in the service sector of metropolitan India⁴] for the construction workers, offering them ample reasons to stay on, for the maximum duration they can. Then adopting a wider lens, I argue that the influx of Bengali labour migrants into Bhutan is part of a wider pattern in the region in which labour mobility progressively proceeds from the plains into the hills with these migrants searching for ‘new places for their survival’ (Siraj and Bal, 2017, p. 408).

Methodology

The data for this research was primarily collected through in-depth interviews, and ad-hoc ethnography through field visits, conducted by my student research assistants⁵. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted on the migrant construction workers in three different construction sites in Thimphu, in the fall of 2019. Alongside these, to understand the youths’ perception, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted on employable youths living in Thimphu, within the same time frame. The recruitment of interviewees for the first data set focused on migrant construction workers from West Bengal, owing to their population dominance within the migrant construction workers in Bhutan. To supplement and triangulate it, I conducted four in-depth follow-up interviews from one of the construction sites, and several conversational interviews in different instances, with different stakeholders. Additionally, secondary sources such as newspaper clippings, social media discussions, NGO reports, and Government reports were consulted and used in the writing of this paper.

Locating the migrant construction workers

In Bhutan, while unemployment is a recurring concern, there continues to be a high demand for migrant workers, especially in the construction sector. Most of these migrant labourers come from the Indian state of West Bengal, an immediate neighbour of Bhutan’s main trade gate, which is Phuntsholing. A United Nation (UN) Situation Report (2014, p. 43) in this regard notes:

Bhutan is predominately a migrant-receiving country, as very few Bhutanese migrate abroad⁶. The Bhutanese labour force is reluctant to do manual jobs due to low wages and a negative stigma attached to this type of work. This has, consequently, resulted in a labour shortage and opened up opportunities for workers from neighbouring

⁴ The concept was borrowed from what anthropologists “Stef Jansen and Staffan Lofving describe as a ‘struggle for home’, a contest over how places are endowed with hope and a sense of possibility” (Karlsson and Kikon’s 2017, p. 14.).

⁵ In carrying out this research I had employed two student research assistants who are both students at RTC, to conduct and transcribe interviews.

⁶ The situation of out-migration has however changed in the last few years.

countries. The migrant labourers from abroad tend to have significantly lower pay scales.

On any given Sunday, the main streets and the market pockets of Thimphu are flooded by Indian labourers who work at the construction sites. The same scene, although to a lesser degree, is found in Phuntsholing⁷ (Chukha District) and Paro. Working from Monday through Saturday – as Sunday is their rest day and also a day for them to procure their week-long necessities – these labourers maintain a somewhat clientele relationship with specific shops and vendors. They know the exact (often best-priced) place to purchase their supplies. Calling them *bhaiya*⁸, and conversing with them in Hindi, the shopkeepers welcome them and attend to their list, with the equal attention they would give to other Bhutanese customers.

Come weekday, one will hardly find any of these labourers walking in the streets of Thimphu. Where do they all go? They confine themselves to the premises of the construction sites they work in. Only after an intensive eight hours of work, they retreat, in the evening, to their simple makeshift houses, and sometimes by the nearby local grocery, often drinking *Rockbee*, a cheap Bhutanese blended grape brandy. Interestingly, some of the younger aged labourers indulge in the *PUBG Mobile*⁹ or *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, one of the most popular mobile games among the young generation today.

The coming of migrant labourers in substantial numbers in Bhutan dates back to the late 1980s when the country felt a 'strong need' for non-agricultural labour. This need was mostly to conduct infrastructure-related works, such as road constructions, hydro-projects, and so on, to roll out the country's modernisation project (Savada, 1991). Migrant workers as a whole constitute such a significant proportion of the workforce in the Bhutanese economy that the fourth objective of the Department of Labour, in the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources' (MoLHR) 2019 Annual Report reads: 'To strengthen foreign workers administration'.

While the National Assembly of Bhutan in 2004 decided to put a ceiling on incoming foreign workers to 45,000 (Palden, 2017), *The Bhutanese*¹⁰ reported the breach of this decision early in September 2012. Reporting about the then labour minister, Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi's statement made in May 2012, it cited the presence of 54,821 foreign workers with work permits (Wangmo, 2012). The figure has fallen over the years. However, with about 41,000 workers employed in the construction sector, as of June 2019, the count of these migrant workers in the construction sector alone still accounts for about ten per cent of the entire employment in the country (MoLHR, 2019,

⁷ Phuntsholing, despite being the most important border town, has lesser number of construction workers in comparison to Thimphu.

⁸ *Bhaiya* means brother in Hindi.

⁹ *PUBG or PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* is an online multiplayer battle royale game developed by PUBG Corporation, a subsidiary of South Korean video game company Bluehole. The game is available on PC, Xbox, PlayStation and Mobile. The game was created by Brendan Greene (PlayerUnknown) and released back in 2017.

(See: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tencent.ig&hl=en>)

¹⁰ *The Bhutanese* is a weekly newspaper in Bhutan.

cited in Zangpo, 2020). This has also translated to roughly Nu. 7bn (~ 92.6 million USD) remitted outside as payments for these foreign workers (RMA, 2019).

Flows and determinants of labour migration

At the macro level, the construction sector has always been a ‘key sector’ of the Bhutanese economy, featuring in every other sector as well. A synoptic look at the Eleventh Five Year Plan (FYP) reveals that the construction sector has consistently contributed substantially to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). At its lowest, (in the year 2008) it still contributed 11.43 per cent to the GDP (RGOB, 2013). As of 2018, the latest National Accounts Statistics notes that the construction sector accounts for 14.20 per cent of the national GDP, contributing about one percentage point to the GDP growth (National Statistics Bureau, 2019).

With the expansion of regional tourism, improved income, higher aspirations, and rapid urbanisation, in the past few years, the country has been witnessing a housing construction boom. This is reportedly fuelled by the ‘strong demand’ for rental apartments, shops, hotels and office space (Kharka, 2019), especially in Thimphu, Paro, Phuntsholing, and Wangdue. Furthermore, ‘the easy availability of loans from financial institutions has encouraged people to invest heavily in housing construction’ (ibid.). All these private housing enterprises, along with the many ongoing government construction projects, have led to high demand for construction workers. The demand for construction workers is of such a magnitude that, going by the current labourers’ population, it would mean roughly five per cent of the entire Bhutanese population would be needed in their absence to keep construction projects going.

Nonetheless, why is the Bhutanese involvement so low in the construction sector when there is already a rising unemployment problem routinely highlighted by policymakers, media, and academics? On May 23, 2019, a Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) headline stated: ‘Unemployment rate [in Bhutan] highest in 2018 at 3.4 per cent’¹¹. The figure is a steep jump from 3.1 per cent in 2017, and 2.1 in 2016. The report then explains that ‘nearly 10,500 people were without work during the reference period, actively seeking and available for work’¹². The statistics for the year 2019 are yet to be published; however, the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) database, which pegs the figures a per cent lower¹³, estimates the 2019 figures to be higher than 2018.

While the statistics point to a relatively low figure, in comparison with the regional average or world average, the overall youth unemployment rate in the year 2018 is estimated at 15.7 per cent, a leap from 12.3% in 2017 (Labour Force Survey Report, 2019). Coupled with significant unaccounted youth underemployment, which is usually premised on ‘extremely low wages’, and part-time or

¹¹ <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=114622> (Accessed April 20, 2020)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ ILOSTAT database estimates unemployment rate in Bhutan in 2017 to be 2.358%, subsequently 2.303% in 2018, and 2.342 % in 2019 (Data retrieved March 1, 2020 from World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?end=2019&locations=BT-AF-BD-IN-NP-MV-LK-PK&start=1991&view=chart>)

seasonal work (Pelzom, Tshering and Katel, 2018), at least some of them should have been absorbed in the construction sector. Why are they not? The answer is twofold: one is from the youth themselves, and the other from the employers.

Many of the youths my student research assistants interviewed, especially the school and college graduates, prioritised either employment in the public sector or going abroad. The National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan (2017) estimates that about 30 per cent of youth studying bachelor's degrees and above are abroad. Within this segment, many of them go abroad, not just to study but also to earn.

There is no systematic data collection on the out-migration of the Bhutanese population (UN, 2012). Still, the United Nations' Population Division projected the rate of Bhutanese out-migration rate to be about 4.2 per cent in the year 2019. While the details of these emigrants cannot be ascertained, the Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) reports a spike in remittances, in the past few years, with the maximum coming from Australia and the USA (Dorji, 2019). Approximately Nu 1.5 Bn. from Australia and Nu 1.3 Bn from the USA, *Kuensel*¹⁴ reported (ibid.), were remitted to the country in the year 2019 alone.

A document published by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs (2018) stated that, as of 2016, almost 6,000 migrants living in Australia were Bhutan born, within which the participation rate (for age 15 above) in the labour force was 56 per cent. This has created a spiral effect in the aspiration of the educated Bhutanese youth. Their desire to migrate is furthered by seeing and hearing about the lucrative remittances. With this, the number of youths who are willing to stay back and work in Bhutan is reduced significantly.

As for their employability in the construction sector, for many Bhutanese, especially the youth, interviews suggest that construction work is 'not dignified'. It is seen as an 'occupation of the Bengalis', or an 'occupation of the *Jagar*¹⁵' (as they put it) more broadly. Besides this, public media (such as *Kuensel*, BBS, *The Bhutanese*, and others) recurrently report on the lack in the skillset among the youth for construction work. Additionally, from the employers' side, the Indian migrant workers are seen as more skilful and 'experienced', as against the novice Bhutanese in the (construction) labour market. Most Bhutanese employers, apart from what has been mentioned, find it more economical to employ the Indian migrant construction workers too.

A consensual provision is put in place, perhaps to encourage the Bhutanese to join the workforce, where the Bhutanese workers are paid higher than the migrant workers, at least in the construction sector. While a skilled migrant mason earns anything from Nu. 500 to Nu. 800, and an unskilled migrant labourer (usually apprentices) earns Nu. 300 to Nu. 400, a Bhutanese involved in any of the two in construction work is to be paid about Nu. 200 above that.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, Bhutan witnessed a large number of returnees from abroad, comprising both students and migrant workers. This also led to an increase in unemployment. The Bhutanese government, addressing this while also trying to bridge the halting of many infrastructure projects (which was among the worst hit during the pandemic) owing to the need for construction workers, called for the recruitment of around 15,000 workers, in collaboration with Project Dantak

¹⁴ *Kuensel* is the single largest daily in Bhutan.

¹⁵ *Jagar* is a Dzongkha (official language of Bhutan) term to refer to an Indian.

(a subsidiary of India based Border Road Organisation). Reporting about this, *The Bhutanese* in their Facebook post,¹⁶ quoted the Prime Minister as saying: ‘Dantak put job vacancies to pay Nu 12,000 for those without [any] qualification but not a single Bhutanese applied’ (Sic.). Simply put, it appears that the unemployed Bhutanese prefer to stay unemployed than to join the construction sector, especially in manual labour. Another deterrent, however, could have been the monthly cash grant provided by the Druk Gyalpo’s Relief *Kidu* programme¹⁷, which is a noble initiative from His Majesty the King. A monthly cash grant is provided to all Bhutanese individuals whose livelihoods have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the objective of protecting the most vulnerable citizens.

This need and demand for construction workers in Bhutan, owing to the situation described above, is then readily met by the surplus-labour in India. In India, as is the case with many other countries, unemployment is a major problem. As of 2019, the already underreported employment rate stood more than three times that of Bhutan¹⁸. Already accentuated with its vast population, the Indian working population has much lower wage expectancy, and higher resilience (Pandey, 2019), especially in terms of manual work. Accordingly, construction work (especially abroad) provides many of these unemployed ‘low-skilled’ or ‘entry-level’ workers with much-needed employment (Buckley et al., 2016). These labourers who otherwise receive low wages with no proper long-term contract, in their home state(s), readily reap the situation in Bhutan. This opening also, to a certain extent, contributes to West Bengal in having a much lower unemployment rate, in comparison to India’s national average (Mint Analytics, 2020). Besides reducing the number of unemployed persons in their home state(s), the remittances of these migrant construction workers help generate employment (Siddiqui, 2003).

Becoming a labourer in Bhutan

Key in this supply of (surplus) labour from India are the contractors, who are mostly non-locals. These contractors serve as the middleman who recruit the labourers from the hubs of the neighbouring states Assam and West Bengal, mostly from the latter. They are also the person in direct contact with the owners of the construction sites, and the variability of the worker’s wage depends on them, and their contract. Unlike the recruitment for other ‘advanced Asian economies’ like Singapore (MOM, 2017), these workers are not required to go through testing centres, nor pass any exam. They are simply recruited based on their personal testimony of work experience, or recommendation from the existing contract labourers.

Once the workers are recruited from their native places, they are brought in to the country with a tentative letter of permit from the owners, along with a certificate of approval from the Department of Labour, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, to be allowed to enter the country (RGOB, 2008). The owner, or someone on his/her behalf, then applies for a formal ‘Work Permit’, after their

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/TheBhutaneseNewspaper/posts/2761912963914616> (Accessed July 16, 2020)

¹⁷ See: <https://royalkidu.bt/press-release/index.html>; <https://bhutanfound.org/press-release-from-the-druk-gyalpos-relief-kidu/> (Accessed July 16, 2020)

¹⁸ <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/unemployment-rate> (Accessed July 7, 2020)

arrival, which is to be issued by the Department of Immigration (under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs). These work permits are usually issued for a maximum period of one year, with multiple shorter duration options.

While the number of labourers allowed in government projects depends on the ‘actual cost of contract’ (RGOB, 2008, p. 3), for private constructions, five to twelve foreign workers are allowed ‘depending on the total square feet of construction as certified by an engineer’ (ibid.). The Royal Government of Bhutan also mandates that foreign workers who come to work in the country must be aged between 20 to 50 years, and the permit is to be issued after determining ‘whether Bhutanese workers are available to do the jobs against which foreign workers are requested’ (ibid., p. 5).

Migrant construction workers’ accommodation. (Photo: Author)

On arriving at their worksites, these labourers are housed in makeshift houses, usually with no windows or furniture inside. The inside is dimly lit, and the space is just about adequate to shelter after a tiresome day. Most of these migrant construction workers, especially the ones working in private construction sites, leave their families at home and come to the country without any



dependents, hence the issue of privacy does not arise in the housing. Dependent permits are issued, by the Government, for any immediate relative of a Work Permit holder, but the workers prefer not to bring them. ‘My kids are studying; they are in the village school. My wife does not earn. She looks after my two kids and my old mother,’ Amit, a labourer, said. ‘It is better for them [meaning to say, it is more convenient and cost-effective] that they stay back in the village,’ he added. Some reportedly own small farms, including animals, in which their families work. ‘My wife, she works in our tobacco field. It is a small farm, but we earn a bit from there,’ a co-worker of Amit mentioned.

At dusk, holding a partially empty travel air-bag in one hand, and somewhat old winter blankets draped in a transparent blanket bag in the other, these workers reach Thimphu, after an entire day,

or sometimes two days, journey in small groups. Wasting no time, they are often set to work the very next day after their arrival. Although there are many first-timers among them, many others have been working in the country for several years, and some as long as 15 years, going in and out of the country based on work availability. 'I cannot calculate the exact number of years that I have lived in Bhutan because I come to Bhutan for work on a contract basis, and after the contract expires I have to return to India till I get a new contractor who hires me to work in Bhutan,' Abdul, another labourer, explained.

Plenty of research discusses a growing trend of precariousness in construction work (Standing 2011; Buckley et al., 2016; Hamid and Tutt, 2019, among many others), in the sense of uncertainty, unpredictability and/or risk (Branch and Hanley, 2011), owing to the neoliberal work regime. The testimonies of the construction workers interviewed reveal the same. On being asked how they view their position in the Bhutanese labour market, all interviewees stated that they see themselves as being there only temporarily. Amit mentioned – despite having worked in Bhutan for five years, and although he would like to continue working consistently – employers and the state still view him as transient. 'We can only be here for two years in a stretch, after that we have to go back home for some time to cool down and renew our visa again,' he said. Even as the precarity of work persists, many reportedly find another job before completing their existing work contract; thus, they remain.

Living in Bhutan

Although many labourers admit to their experiences being pleasurable, they are not without unpleasant episodes. Several articulated a few such unpleasant encounters. 'It's not very explicit, but they treat us in a somehow demeaning manner, and sometimes they discriminate against us overtly just because we are labourers and we do manual work,' labourer Faisal said. '...but not everyone is like that, and that's not every time or every day,' he clarified. Another respondent, Faisal's co-worker, elucidated: 'It's not very different, although, in [Indian] *Shehers* (cities). Because of the nature of our work, we are not treated properly, even in India'.

As is the case for all foreign workers in Bhutan, these migrant labourers who work in Thimphu are not allowed mobility beyond Thimphu and Paro. Foreign workers require special permission from the Department of Immigration, both for work and sightseeing to other dzongkhags. Interestingly, however, these migrant labourers do not show interest in 'exploring' Bhutan. They will instead have all their days spent working and earning money. Much to the contrary, given a chance, they indicated, they would happily work overtime. 'It would be nice if we could get a chance to do overtime so that we can make additional income... Most of these houses we work in do not have light facilities to facilitate overtime work after daylight,' Abdul said.

These workers work six days a week, eight hours each day, and take a day off on Sundays. For any long break, spanning about a week or more, they would rather go to their homes and visit their families. Only in some occasional 'emergencies', do they take leave for a few days, within their contract duration, which they usually prefer not to. 'Visiting home frequently makes it difficult to save money,' they said. As with the finding of the earliest construction ethnography of Sykes (1969),

these workers show great keenness on 'high earnings'. Their keenness, however, unlike the *navvies*¹⁹ Sykes studied, was not for 'high consumption', and 'high saving'. It was only for the latter. They optimise their spending and consumption as much as possible. On an average, interviews reveal, they spend just Nu. 1000 each week for their food and other basic necessities. Hence, they are able to save a good proportion of their earnings.

Many, if not most, of these labourers revealed that they do not use formal Bhutanese banking (and a few of them do not use formal Indian banking either) for their transactions and savings. They take their earnings only at the time of going home, after completing their contract, in bulk, so that they can 'take a huge amount home'. Alternately, a few prefer to send money to their families if and when one among them goes to their native places. Apart from not feeling the need to regularly send money home, in their reasoning, they 'misspend' their time by going to the bank, and alongside they also 'waste' money both on taxi fares and the remittance fees the bank charges.

The nature of their work – being on construction sites – often gets them injured, but almost everyone interviewed, on being asked, mentioned their decrease in the propensity to fall ill. 'It is a little cold here [meaning Bhutan], given the place I come from [which is West Bengal], but Bhutan is very clean and has less pollution compared to India, so when I am here, I stay healthy. In a year, I get sick just twice or thrice – that's usually when there is a change of season,' Ajay said. 'I also get sick. I got sick twice, but it is much less frequent than when I am in India. Besides, we get medicines readily for free, from the hospital itself; health service is very good in Bhutan,' his friend concurred.

All but one construction worker interviewed either never went to school or dropped out of school. This, however, did not stop their aspirations. Again, like the *navvies* (Sykes, 1969) many of them aspire to earn, save, and invest their money in their home towns/villages – either starting a new business, buying a farm, or expanding and upgrading their existing cottage scale enterprise. To triangulate the data, intending to enhance the credibility of the research information (Salkind, 2010), obtaining information about them from their co-workers was quite easy, as they usually knew about each other's background and circumstances. In that sense, rather than being individualistic, these workers show strong communal ties.

¹⁹ Coined in the late eighteenth century in Great Britain, *navvies* refer to the manual labourers working on major civil engineering projects (See: <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/britain-1700-to-1900/transport-1750-to-1900/navvies/>)



Fig. 2: A construction worker at work. (Photo: Author)

Conclusion

While it is true that these labourers first come to Bhutan out of economic necessity and, after reaching the kingdom, their experiences constantly make them feel dispensable. Nevertheless, most of the labourers interviewed indicated their desire to stay as long as they legally can. For them, like the case of indigenous migrants from Northeast India working in the service sector of the metropolitan, Bhutan offers hope; ‘hope and a sense of possibility’ (Karlsson and Kikon, 2017, p. 14). Although faced with multiple challenges and occasional discrimination (perhaps to a lesser degree than North-eastern Indian migrants in the metropolis²⁰), as well as being housed in makeshift shanty accommodation, Bhutan offers them ample reasons to remain. From being provided with a much longer contract (often renewed with a new project before completion) to higher pay, better welfare facilities, and healthier environment, most of these migrant workers would stay for the maximum duration they can.

This phenomenon of labour in-migration, however, is not unique to Bhutan. Nasrin Siraj and Ellen Bal (2017) in their ethnographic account showed how Bengali migration, in the case of Bangladesh, apart from a state-sponsored ‘population relocations scheme’, saw a spontaneous movement from the plains into the hills, owing to ‘the large number of impoverished people who were looking for new places for their survival’ (p. 408). In the states of Northeast India too, despite

²⁰ See: McDuié-Ra, D. (2012). *Northeast migrants in Delhi: Race, refuge and retail*. Amsterdam University Press; Haokip, T. (2020). From ‘Chinky’ to ‘Coronavirus’: Racism against Northeast Indians during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Asian Ethnicity*, DOI:10.1080/14631369.2020.1763161.

taxing document procedures and necessities (such as Inner Line Permit²¹), incentivised by higher pay, recurring work availability, and longer and more stable work duration, labourers from the plains of West Bengal come to work and stay, wherever, and for as long as they can. Having said that, the migrant construction workers in Bhutan often face the dilemma of wanting to be with their families too, while also desiring to make the best of the opportunities they get. This came out loudly during the outbreak of COVID-19. After the announcement of lockdown in India and Bhutan, thousands of these migrant labourers in Bhutan wanted to return to their homes (Yuden, 2020). Many stayed back in Bhutan however, and some who went home for a short break before the lockdown wanted to come back to work, but were not allowed to. This only highlights the constant quandary in choosing between their livelihoods and their loved ones.

Acknowledgements

This article is a partial outcome²² of a research project funded by RTC Research Development Grant (2019 to 2020). I would like to thank the RTC Research Committee for the same. Additionally, I would also like to thank my student research assistants Kuenga Norbu and Kristina Powdel for helping me collect data for this research, my senior colleagues Dolma Choden Roder, Jelle JP Wouters and Shawn Christopher Rowlands for reading the earlier draft and helping me make many improvements.

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²¹ 'Inner Line Permit is an official document issued by the state government that allows Indian citizens to travel to the state under IPL for a limited period of time. It is compulsory for the citizens from outside those states to issue the permit for entering into a protected state.' [Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/how-is-inner-line-permit-related-to-cao-805813.html>]

²² The quantitative dimension of the research will be published in the next issue of *Rig Tshoel*.

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