Invisible and Visible Precarity in Urban Bhutan: Housing as an Analytical Lens

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Abstract: Internal migration is becoming a defining feature of Bhutan's landscape. While quantitative data on population movement is increasingly available, the lived experiences of migrants remain underrepresented in public discourse. This article draws on research conducted under the SUCCESS Project (Successful Intervention Pathways for Migration as Adaptation) and centers the voices of low-income migrants. Focusing on two of the country's most urbanized locations; Thimphu and Phuentsholing, the study highlights the everyday realities, challenges, and adaptive strategies of individuals navigating labour migration. While migrants from different socio-economic backgrounds adapt in varied ways to new environments, this article focuses specifically on vulnerable groups to identify the key challenges they face in destination areas - spaces often associated with opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility. Although migration is linked to upward mobility, for low-income and vulnerable populations it can also introduce new forms of precarity. This article examines the experiences of low-income migrants in the two destination areas through the lens of housing,

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highlighting how migration can expose individuals to new and often overlooked vulnerabilities.

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Introduction

Internal migration has become a defining feature of Bhutan's landscape (Gosai and Sulewski 2020), driven by uneven development, concentration of services in urban areas, and employment opportunities (Gosai and Sulewski 2020). More recent research shows that climate change impacts in rural areas are also becoming part of multifaceted migration decisions (Katel et al. 2024; Paldon et al. 2025). While this mobility is often framed as a pathway to socio-economic improvement (Chowdhury et al. 2012), the experiences of low-income internal migrants reveal a more complex and uneven reality. Their experiences are not only shaped by income and career mobility constraints, but also by the socio-spatial environment they occupy at their destination.

Thimphu and Phuentsholing (Pasakha is a part of Phuentsholing municipality) are identified as major cities, where migrants go in search of work (Gosai and Sulewski 2020). Little scholarly research has been done on internal migration (Gosai and Sulewski 2020), especially those that focus on a particular socio-economic demography. Successful Intervention Pathways for Migration as Adaptation (SUCCESS) is one of the few (if any) research projects that substantially researches the lives of low-income migrants in destination sites in Bhutan, and immobile populations in origin sites that are impacted by climate change. This article delves into the lived experiences of low-income migrants in Thimphu and Pasakha – two significant destination sites for internal migration (Gosai and Sulewski 2020). They represent the two realities of Bhutan's urbanization; Thimphu as the administrative and service-oriented

capital, and Pasakha as the industrial and commercial hub in southern Bhutan. Both places receive substantial migrant in-flows, and the precarities that emerge from each site differ markedly, making them analytically valuable for understanding how urban contexts shape migrant precarity.

Visible and Invisible Housing Precarity

Urban precarity describes a condition of persistent vulnerability and insecurity in urban contexts, emerging from unstable economic, legal, social, and spatial arrangements that render everyday life uncertain and risky (Campbell and Laheij 2021). It is not only an experience of a certain population but also a condition perceived and constructed through social, spatial, and institutional lenses. When basic material conditions are unmet, people's lives become fragile and insecure. This insecurity is not just economic, it is felt psychologically and emotionally, often as stress, anxiety, and trauma. To survive in these conditions, people often resort to putting in more effort that leads to exhaustion – working long hours, taking on multiple jobs, and constantly adapting just to get by (Lancione 2019). The concepts of visibility and invisibility help illustrate why certain forms of precarity become publicly acknowledged and others remain unacknowledged within the urban landscape.

Yiftachel (2009) writes how informality has come to characterize a vast number of metropolitan regimes, where more than half the population can be classified as 'informal.' He explains how human suffering in urban landscapes is associated with chronic employment insecurity, and home demolitions, and beyond that lie the structural forces. These forces produce the space in which respondents to this study are partially incorporated into urban community, economy, and space, but are excluded from membership in city polity, where

migrants do not vote in their place of residence. Yiftachel (2009) argues that these partially incorporated people, localities, and activities are part of urban informality, which he terms as "gray space," situated between full legality and outright illegality. According to the author, this space contains a multitude of groups, bodies, housing, lands, economies, and discourses that lie in the shadow of formal, planned city polity and economy. In this article, the urban precarity associated with what Yiftachel (2009) identifies as "gray space" will be studied through a lens of visibility and invisibility in the two major destination sites of internal migration in Bhutan.

Visibility refers to when precarity is spatially seen, physically legible, and socially recognized. In such cases, precarity is often materially inscribed in the environment through informal housing, environmental hazards, and infrastructural characters. These conditions create a space where certain groups become noticeable to authorities, CSOs, and even surrounding communities, which gives an avenue for interventions.

Invisibility by contrast emerges when precarities come as a part of formal structures, and are hidden behind normative markers of urban life, masking financial and housing vulnerabilities. The struggles of migrants may remain hidden as they live in formal spaces, hold service-sector jobs, or inhabit neighbourhoods without obvious markers of deprivation. This invisibility can increase the likelihood of not getting policy attention and skew the dominant understanding of urban wellbeing and prosperity.

In this study, the framework of visibility and invisibility allows us to understand why migrant precarity manifests so differently in Bhutan's two major urban destinations for internal migration. In Pasakha, precarity is unmistakenly visible; etched into dust, air pollution, and physically fragile homes. In Thimphu, precarities are not so visible and are hidden in plain sight, masked by formal housing arrangements, dual income households, and the

city's capital identity. This framework then helps us understand how spatial arrangement and environment can influence the experiences of populations belonging to similar groups.

Migration and Settlement Patterns in Bhutan

Paldon et al. (2025) and Sutton (2025) state that the comparatively low economic returns from agriculture may have led to increasing rural-urban migration. This force of 'pushing out' migrants from rural areas is complemented by a forceful pull coming from Bhutan's urban centres, where there are promises of better infrastructure and employment. Internal migration, according to Gosai and Sulewski (2023) and National Statistics Bureau (2020), has been shaped by education, familial moves, and employment opportunities in urban centres. Over the years, rural to urban migration has increased continuously. Places like Pasakha, with its industrial zone, and Thimphu the capital city, have become a destination for most internal migrants. Insights from data collected reveal that these two places are often chosen due to their ability to offer jobs, and also for being able to employ populations with low education attainment. While migration may be associated with improved living conditions, settlement patterns among low-income migrants in the two destination sites reveal a different urban experience. This article will explore urban precarity amongst low-income migrants centering around housing in Thimphu and Pasakha.

As the capital and administrative hub, Thimphu attracts a lot of internal migrants. It offers a range of employment opportunities, including those without prior experience and low or no education attainment, such as in hospitality, retail, and low-income service jobs. Unlike many South Asian cities where informal settlements dominate low-income migrant housing (Md Salauddin and Piracha 2024), Thimphu displays a mixed settlement pattern: a combination of formal rental housing and informal squatter settlements often

located well away from the public eye. The informal squatter settlements are occupied by employees of the Thimphu Thromde Workforce, and are perched up in locations identified by the Thromde, thereby giving a sense of formality to their settlement. A majority of low-income migrants live in rented units, frequently shared to manage costs. While these living arrangements offer a sense of stability, they often mask financial fragility including limited savings, debts, and long-term financial insecurity.

On the other hand, Pasakha presents a contrasting settlement pattern. As an industrial zone situated in Phuentsholing Thromde, it primarily attracts migrants willing to do factory work. Informal housing in Pasakha has been shaped by industrial expansion rather than planned urban development; hence it lacks many essential services like health care and schools. As these informal settlements are not officially recognized as residential areas, they fall outside the formal planning and service provision framework, resulting in limited access to services. Mr Jagay Rai in an interview with Bhutan Broadcasting Service reminisced about how Pasakha used to be before factories were built, "There was nothing here back then. It was just our village and our farms. We used to grow areca nut, maize, and other vegetables. Now, we don't even have clean drinking water. Everything is being destroyed by chemicals. In those days, we didn't even know what chemicals were, as we were illiterate,"(Tshering Zam and Chezom 2025). His account highlights the major shift Pasakha went through, from agrarian to industrial estate, underscoring environmental degradation, loss of traditional livelihoods, and declining access to services.

Today Pasakha is filled with migrants who reside in makeshift squatter settlements that are built using flimsy materials such as CGI sheets, tarpaulin, and plyboards. The housing pattern in Pasakha reveals obvious spatial markers of precarity including overcrowding, inadequate sanitation facilities,

persistent dust and air pollution, and a harsh landscape, all of which exacerbate their vulnerability. While Thimphu and Pasakha both depend heavily on the labour contribution of low-income migrants, their contrasting settlement patterns produce different forms of vulnerability for migrant workers. Thimphu's formal housing order absorbs migrants in ways that diffuse and mask their hardships, whereas Pasakha's geographical and industrial character renders vulnerability overtly visible. Understanding these different urban settlement patterns is important to situating migrant experiences within the broader national dialogue on urban planning, social protection, and equitable development.

Pasakha: Visibility of Precarity

A small road leading away from the highway to Phuentsholing takes you to Pasakha. It is easy to miss the road intersection if one does not intend to travel there. In February 2024, I made my first visit there to drop off our Research Assistants (RAs)[2] at their home while researching in Pasakha. The first thing that I noticed was how the sky is missing in Pasakha. The town was blanketed with thick clouds, which were most likely pollution from the factories. While Bhutan remains carbon-negative, a significant chunk of the emissions and pollution it produces comes from this little strip of flatland. Home to approximately 40 industries, the area is persistently covered by air pollution and dust. As we continued our drive deeper into Pasakha, we saw children as young as 7 to 10 years old, happily playing in the dust by the road. I realized how normalized this level of pollution has become to the residents here. There are housing colonies – squatter settlements – built beside the large factories. We could see how precarious their living conditions were. The houses nestled

[2] We travelled to Pasakha as a part of SUCCESS project work.

beside the factories seemed to have toilets perched outside their homes. I could not imagine how it must be living in these homes made from CGI sheets, especially during the hot summers. This is not a common sight in Bhutan; I was shocked to see that such a place existed in our country. We are more familiar with the 'tourist representation' of Bhutan; green forests and beautiful architectural designs elsewhere, but in Pasakha, even the little green they had was covered in white dust. A respondent shared the following picture during a Photovoice[3] interview, "Here's a picture of one of the factories. Despite being a carbon-negative country, we still contribute to global warming to some extent. Factories that produce silicon, especially Ferro, emit the most pollution..... In our everyday lives, we've experienced climate impacts like hailstorms, which were uncommon before last year. And I believe these factories might be partially responsible for it."

Figure 1. Colony in Pasakha. Photo Taken by a participant for a trial run of Photovoice, 2024)

[3] Photovoice: a participatory research method where community members use cameras to document their lives, concerns, and strengths, then discuss the photos in groups to spark dialogue, build critical consciousness, and advocate for change.

Figure 2: air-pollution in Pasakha, with a dusty sky blanketing the area. Photo courtesy: Nima Tshering, 2024

Our RAs were going to live in a place called GurungDara, a 10 minute drive uphill from Pasakha industrial estate. We learned on the way that unlike migrant residents down below in the valley, people in GurungDara were locals and owned their homes. In such a short distance, you could see the stark difference between their environment and that of the migrants – here there were cleaner roads, more greenery, and stable concrete homes, even though GurungDara too is affected by air pollution.

On the edge of the industrial valley of Pasakha, a small temple has been built. It looked as though it did not belong there, as we are more familiar with temples and monasteries being located in pristine places. But its presence must offer some solace to those that live here. We later learned from respondents that a factory in Pasakha had built it for the welfare of its employees.

Pasakha offers a striking example of how migrant vulnerability becomes visibly inscribed into the physical landscape, and how obvious the presence

of precarity is. Unlike Thimphu, which will be discussed further later on, the material conditions of migrant life in Pasakha is exposed, unmistakable, and difficult to ignore. Most of the homes that the migrant population occupy are makeshift houses that are neither durable nor designed for long term comfortable habitation. These houses are situated beside factories, umbrellaed by a thick blanket of smoke. The fragility of the housing itself becomes a daily reminder of insecurity, broadcast publicly through the built environment.

Rai and Wouters (2024) write about how housing structures, especially a lack of proper bathing facilities, expose women to gendered vulnerabilities. Most migrant houses in Pasakha have toilets perched outside their homes - some of which do not include bathing facilities. This forces people to bathe outside. Women in Pasakha have shared that this exposes them to teasing and jeering from passerbys. A female photovoice respondent from Pasakha shared, "I want to describe the condition of our toilets through this picture. Even though we live in the rental houses, the toilets are rusted, worn-out, congested and poorly maintained. We don't have separate toilets for each household, we have to share the toilet with our neighbours. Despite our efforts to clean them, stains and foul smells persist, aggravated by water shortages. The lack of proper bathing facilities makes things worse, leading us to bathe outdoors near the tank area where we've installed a tap. Bathing in such an exposed area makes both me and my daughters uncomfortable, as anyone passing by can see us. We manage with half pants and t-shirts while bathing, ignoring the comments and teasing from bystanders."

Figure 3: lack of santiation facilities as captured by a female photovoice respondent in Pasakha, 2024.

A lack of proper bathing facilities does not only affect women. A male photovoice respondent shared that he rents a place where 8 tenants have to share one toilet (image below). This toilet does not include bathing facilities, forcing residents to bathe by streams or under rain water. Migrants in Pasakha face difficulties in maintaining hygiene due to a lack of proper housing facilities. Moreover they are exposed to further danger, as they seek water from nearby streams and rivers, prone to flooding during monsoon, to bathe and do their laundry.

Figure 4: lack of sanitation facilities as captured by a male respondent in Pasakha, 2024.

Pasakha is also prone to floods and landslides – accounts in the news, and interviews reveal the moodiness of the terrain there. Almost every monsoon, there is a landslide that blocks the Bhawanijhora Bridge, the only bridge that connects Pasakha to Phuentsholing – where essential services like schools, hospitals, banks, and towns are located. The picture below, shared by a respondent, illustrates the precariousness of the environment that surrounds the Bhawanijhora bridge (image taken 2024).

Figure 5: Bhawanijhora Bridge and environmental precarity in Pasakha. Photo

courtesy: Photovoice respondent, 2024

Although houses themselves are not washed away, the fact that there is annual risk of flooding and landslide[4] from the hill above the Bhawanijhora Bridge in Pasakha shows how heavy monsoon rains must be in Pasakha. Interviews in Pasakha reveal that since the makeshift houses are built on the ground, there are instances where rainwater seeps through the floors and roofs, damaging property and making it difficult to live in these homes. A respondent shared, "When there is continuous rainfall throughout the day, my house floor gets flooded with rainwater. This area where I built my house used to be the path of a small stream before I settled here. Unable to afford rental housing, I covered the stream with stones and mud and temporarily built my home in this location. As a result, during heavy rainfall, the water overflows, causing flooding inside my house. I don't blame the water; I acknowledge that this is a consequence of building in an area where a stream once flowed. Despite the challenges, I don't feel sad about the condition of my house. I feel grateful that I have a bed to sleep in. I accept that these are the realities of living in a place where a stream once ran through."

[4] It has not been determined if that hill has a river or stream. Flood and landslide are used interchangeably to describe the hazard in Bhawanijhora bridge.

Figure 6: floor of house of migrant worker. During the monsoon, rainwater seeps into the house through the ground. Photo courtesy: photovoice respondent in Pasakha, 2024.

Dust and air pollution from surrounding factories add another layer of environmental risk that is tightly intertwined with the poor housing conditions. Fine white dust settles onto their homes, gardens, and living spaces. During a field visit to Pasakha, people said they were unsure whether the vegetables they grow are safe enough to consume, having been exposed to dust and air pollution continuously. They've also said how the thick air pollution above their heads does not allow clothes to dry properly, and laundry is often brought back home dirty with the dust that has settled on it. A home is supposed to provide safety and protection, but in Pasakha, the migrant's precarious houses seem unable to provide much protection. Their housing offers little insulation from dust, heat or pollution, reinforcing a sense that vulnerability is both structural and unavoidable – a living reality for those in Pasakha. Vulnerability is hence not abstract or hidden, it manifests in the

very air that the residents breathe, the rainwater that seeps into their homes, and the instability of structures they depend on. A respondent shared, "This is my personal house, and it comes with many challenges. Although we have free electricity, the house is vulnerable to damage from weather changes like windstorms and hailstones. If sudden damage occurs, we might not get immediate help, which worries me daily. On unfavourable weather days, I constantly worry about heavy rainfall or windstorms potentially blowing away the house. The house lacks proper windows, and while we consider installing them, we're unsure how long we'll stay here. Investing a lot in the house feels risky since we might not recoup the money if we leave. The inadequate walls allow snakes to get inside, which is dangerous, especially with kids around. If the house suffers damage, the company might provide some compensation, but I'm unsure how much help we'll receive. Without savings and without company support, no one else is likely to help us, which adds to my worries."

Figure 7: precarious housing conditions in Pasakha. Photo courtesy: photovoice respondent in Pasakha, 2024.

Unlike in Thimphu, Pasakha's precarity is materially obvious – anyone passing through the place can immediately see the stark conditions of life in Pasakha. Migrant residents are in constant fear of eviction, and do not invest further in improving their living conditions, fearing that they may incur irrecoverable losses if asked to leave, further exacerbating their precarity.

Although one would assume that such visible precarity will translate to better protection or attention, this has not been the case for Pasakha. In fact, it has contributed to a form of normalization, where unsafe housing and environmental exposure was accepted and expected as a part of the industrial character of the town. As a result, migrant living conditions are not only visible, but are naturalized and sedimented into the expectations of what life in Pasakha entails. Housing then becomes the most significant determinant or obvious indicator of vulnerability, making Pasakha a case where landscape itself communicates the precariousness of living conditions of its residents.

Thimphu: Invisibility of Precarity

Thimphu, on the other hand, provides a contrasting picture to that of Pasakha where precarious living conditions are overt and spatially inscribed. Conducting research on the lives of low-income migrants was very difficult in Thimphu due to how well hidden migrant lives are in the capital city. Thimphu's urban landscape, with its regulated building codes and stable appearance, creates an impression of stability. This masks daily negotiations – between rent, expenditure, and savings – that low-income migrants undertake to sustain themselves. Even those that live in squatter settlements tend to be located along riverbanks, hidden behind larger residential and business areas, rendering both their presence and their precarity less visible to the wider public. In fact, residents of Thimphu were largely unaware of these squatter settlements. For those living in rented apartments, the

invisibility is more pronounced as housing appears more stable, well integrated into the urban fabric, making them indistinguishable from homes that are owned by other residents. Beneath this material normality lie the underlying economic and social fragilities that shape the lived experiences of low-income migrants in Thimphu.

Figure 8: View of Thimphu. Photo courtesy: Bhutan Peaceful Tours and Treks

Interview accounts reveal that many low-income migrants in Thimphu do not identify high rent as an issue – as opposed to Bhutan Living Standard Report 2022 which claims that residents in urban areas like Thimphu use more than 30% of their income to pay rent. According to a UN body that promotes socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities, exceeding this threshold, spending more than 30% of income on rent, can lead to financial stress and make it difficult to cover other essential costs (BBS, March 12, 2025). A respondent working as a toilet attendant said, "I live in Namselling and rent a 3 bedroom apartment for Nu. 9000 per month." Her family recently moved

from Babesa, where they were paying Nu. 11,000 monthly – a rent they found difficult to sustain. Her husband, a taxi driver, barely earns Nu. 1000 a day (from which fuel and car expenses must be met), while she earns a little more than her previous job, which only paid her Nu. 9000 per month. Despite both incomes, the family struggles to keep up with rent and daily expenses. When she expressed to her landlord the difficulty in paying rent, she was told she should not have moved into the apartment in the first place, forcing her to meet rental expenses despite challenges.

Another respondent shared that her dual income household makes an average income of Nu. 30,000 a month. She works as a building cleaner, weaving and selling textiles on the side, and her husband is a laymonk, making occasional income from rituals. Her family rents a 2 bedroom apartment for Nu. 8500 per month. When asked if she feels secure living here, she responded, "Yes, I feel secure here. My only plan for now is to weave as much as I can and earn money. Even if the house owner asks me to leave, I believe I can find another place to live and sustain my family by weaving. I am not facing many problems right now since I am self-sufficient. However, we never know what will happen in the future." Her family previously rented an apartment nearby, paying Nu. 13,500 monthly. Now in this new apartment, she feels the place is much more affordable.

Similarly, another respondent described how affordability is shaped by household income and living arrangements. She currently resides in a government subsidized home with her husband, but only six months ago, she was renting an apartment for Nu. 14,000 per month. With a dual income household making an average of Nu. 60,000 a month, she did not consider rent to be a significant burden. Prior to getting married, she had found a roommate through a Facebook group and shared a rental unit with another lady, an arrangement that made living in Thimphu sustainable for her. While on the

surface, this may seem to suggest a level of stability and affordability – respondents able to afford rent – on a deeper examination, it shows that this perceived affordability is achieved through coping strategies such as relying on dual incomes or shared rental arrangements. Although this enables them to maintain a foothold in the city, it also erodes their capacity to save, invest, or plan beyond immediate needs. Many respondents describe living with limited financial buffers and little room to meet unexpected expenses. In fact, no respondent shared an aspiration to buy or own homes in Thimphu, saying that this is beyond their reality. Housing, therefore, functions as a site where precarity is concealed. It looks secure and is paid for, yet contributes to financial fragility that remains largely invisible.

This invisibility is further reinforced by the nature of employment that draws low-income migrants to Thimphu. Many are absorbed into the service, hospitality, and retail sectors where workers are mostly visible in the marketplace, at hotels and cafes, and on the roadside, but their home lives remain out of sight and therefore out of mind. Their integration into formal and public economy creates an illusion of social and economic stability, even when conditions in their private lives reveal a different story. The same retail worker who said that her rental arrangement is comfortable due to subsidized rent also shared that she works a 12 hour shift daily, and although her rent is now cheaper, she is further from her workplace, and has to spend on travel. Unlike Pasakha, where the environment announces hardship and precarity, the vulnerability of low-income migrants in Thimphu unfolds behind closed doors.

The invisible character of their lives extends to governance and planning. Because they are able to pay rent, often by pooling resources or suppressing other expenditures, their housing needs rarely register as urgent within policy frameworks. The absence of visibly deteriorating homes and widespread

informal squatter settlement make their precarity easy to overlook. As a consequence, their vulnerabilities remain unseen, both socially and institutionally.

Thimphu thus presents a form of vulnerability that is subtle yet pervasive. It resides not in the condition of the housing itself, but in the fragile economic arrangements that make housing possible. It is embedded in the mismatch between what is noticeable and what is masked from the public eye. In this manner, Thimphu serves as an example of how urban systems can mask the hardships of low-income populations, creating an environment where vulnerability is simultaneously widespread and difficult to see. Observations from the field reveal that the private spaces of homes are well hidden even from those that live close by/next door – one neighbour often does not know the struggles their neighbour may be living with behind closed doors.

Conclusion

The experiences of low-income internal migrants in Bhutan shed light on a complex characteristic of urban vulnerability; that it cannot be understood merely through material conditions, but must be read through the lenses of visibility and invisibility. By comparing two contrast destinations – Thimphu and Pasakha – this article demonstrates how the same demographic group can encounter fundamentally different forms of precarity depending on where they migrate.

Using housing as a primary lens, the cases in Thimphu and Pasakha illustrate how precarity can manifest differently. Finally, by centring low-income internal migrants and foregrounding housing as a key indicator of precarity, this article highlights a population that sustains the functioning of both destinations, yet remains largely invisible within public discussion on urban development – in one case through normalization due to overtly obvious

precarities that exist as a character of an industrial estate, and in the other through being well hidden within formal structures and the image of a "capital" city. Addressing the needs of these people would not only require infrastructural improvements but also a shift in how vulnerability is conceptualized and understood in Bhutan's rapidly urbanizing context.

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