

Migrant workers driving development: A view from Pasakha, Bhutan

NIMA TSHERING, NITYA RAO, CHOEYING SELDON, & JELLE J.P. WOUTERS

Abstract: this article offers an exposition of the role of migrant workers in driving economic development in Pasakha, which is an industrial estate located on the Bhutan-India border. Originating from rural Bhutan and neighbouring India, these workers fill essential low- and semi-skilled jobs in Pasakha's factories, often residing in makeshift colonies close to the industrial sites. Migrants arrive in Pasakha for a range of reasons, including declining agricultural returns and limited employment opportunities in their places of origins. They consider employment in Pasakha as a pathway to better livelihoods and social mobility, even as their integration into the Pasakha destination also entails a new set of vulnerabilities they need to navigate.

Keywords: Low-Income Migrants, Pasakha Industrial Estate, Cross-Border Labour Migration, Precarity, Housing

Introduction

Pasakha, perched on the Bhutan-India border, is part of Bhutan's southern industrial belt with close to 40 factories manufacturing a range of products from Coca-Cola and beer to chemicals and steel. This of course requires labour with a range of skills. As a 48-year-old local leader, the Tshogpa, told us, the

population of Pasakha is over 5000, of which the sheer majority are migrants, the local voting populace, as permanent residents, being only a mere 150! 'The locals have little connection with the factories or the workers. They have betel nut farms and engage in poultry and piggery; nowadays also giving rooms and houses on rent to the migrant workers', the Tshogpa relayed.

The workers hail from all of the 20 districts of Bhutan, and driven to Pasakha by a range of reasons, from devastation due to floods and landslides, a result of climate change, to declining agricultural returns, poverty, and the lack of employment opportunities in their source areas. One migrant worker shared: 'In my village, our main source of income was through elaichi (cardamom) harvest and the quantity and quality used to be rich but later the production decreased and weeds grew in vast quantities outgrowing the elaichi itself, and here I am.' Another migrant labourer recounted how forest animals, particularly monkeys and wild boars, devour the crops before they can be harvested, leaving them with little to nothing to sustain themselves, leave alone to sell on the market. Others highlight problems related to the market, with Indian rice and vegetables coming in cheaply, which makes the agricultural toil required to harvest local rice and other produce less attractive and profitable.

Additionally, some female migrants view the Pasakha Industrial Estate as a means of escaping broken or abusive marriages, or other challenging family circumstances. It offers them a social escape: a chance to earn a living by working in factories and to begin anew. Several male migrant labourers similarly spoke about a quest for economic independence, and a little adventure, that led them from their villages to Pasakha. 'Here, at least, I don't have to depend on my parents and be a burden to them. I am earning my own money, and sometimes I can even send some home', a young migrant male expressed. A marked advantage for many migrants from rural backgrounds

is that entry-level jobs in Pasakha's factories do not demand advanced educational qualifications. This makes Pasakha an especially attractive destination for those who did not complete higher levels of education. The migrant workers generally live within estate, usually in make-shift huts and houses constructed next to factories – and referred to as colonies.

Approximately 90% of the labour migrants come with their families, given the more regular nature of factory-based employment. Both spouses usually work, to earn enough to fulfil their aspirations. Child-care, however, can at times become an issue, and social support networks, especially parents, are called upon to help young couples manage their work and home. We met 60 year old Sonam from rural Chukha, who had come to stay with her daughter and son-in-law, looking after the children and home while the couple worked. Shifts often extend to 12 hours, a strategy resorted to also to maximise earnings with overtime wages. There is no high school or hospital in this locality, despite the high population and contribution to the economy. We heard from residents of the temporary settlement adjacent to the Coca-Cola factory that the land had been identified for a hospital, hence no investments were being made there in terms of service provision.



Figure 1: The Coca-Cola Housing Colony. Photo courtesy by Choeying Seldon

High levels of pollution, alongside the threats of floods and landslides, feed into the complexities of providing government services there. Dust and pollution is often highlighted by migrant workers as a daily challenge. Tshering, a factory worker, shared: ‘The moment I first arrived here I noticed that the place was very dusty. I thought to myself, how would I survive here? And then the second thing was the heat. I had always lived up in the hills, so the heat here in Pasakha was too much, and I couldn’t adapt well to it. It continuous to be very challenging.’ Another migrant expressed how he at first ‘regretted’ coming to Pasakha ‘because all the places were dusty and the roads were not good. Moreover, the weather was very hot.’ However, over the years, he had ‘adapted’ to this place better.



Figure 2: Living under pollution. Photo courtesy: Nima Tshering

The Experiences of Indian Migrant Labourers

Interestingly, almost 25% of the migrant workers here, close to an estimated 5000 people, are foreign workers, exclusively from India. This is part of a broader trend in Bhutan in which Indian workers make up the largest group of foreign workers, comprising as high as 99.1% of the total foreign workers in the country (Business Bhutan, 2023). In Pasakha, as elsewhere in the country, the recruitment and salaries of Indian workers is usually channelled through so-called Foreign Worker Recruitment Agents. These agents connect employers with prospective workers and streamline the recruitment process, ensuring compliance with skill-sets and the Bhutanese law and documentation. Phuentsholing, of which the Pasakaha is an industrial appendage, is a key hub of these agents. The Indian workers are employed at

the two ends of the workforce spectrum – highly skilled, mostly male migrants, in the steel industry, who in fact conduct the entire operations required for casting steel on a turnkey basis, and are paid relatively well, at one end, and daily casual workers, performing manual, unskilled jobs from cleaning public spaces and breaking stones to petty jobs in shops and restaurants, on the other.

Over 500 Indian men are employed by Lhaki Steel, recruited and paid through contractors. They bring with them a range of skills from operations management to fitting. While recruited for three years, their work permit needs to be renewed each year as per the Bhutanese rules. This process involves medical check-ups, drug tests, and other forms of compliance. The workers we spoke to had experience of working in many countries, but liked Bhutan due to its closeness to their homes in UP and Bihar states of India, decent wages, enforcement of law, ability to travel home when needed, provision of decent housing, transfer of money directly to their bank accounts at home by the contractor, amongst others. Because Pasakha is located immediately on the border, their Indian SIM cards were also operational, allowing them to benefit from cheaper calls and data rates to connect with their families. Visiting the apartment of five Indian labourers, the apartment being provided to them by the factory free of cost, we observed several empty liquor bottles stacked in the corner of their living room – perhaps the only form of relaxation for five men, staying together for several months, working in shifts and managing their domestic chores as well. In fact, earlier much of the staff housing was on the premises of the steel plant, but due to very high levels of pollution and safety concerns, the government notified the factory to provide alternate accommodation to all its workers. The Manager of the plant informed us that this process has now been initiated, but it has meant additional costs including of transport to and from the factory.



Figure 3: Conversing with skilled Indian factory workers at their apartment. Photo courtesy by Choeying Seldon

The daily workers, perhaps 80% of the foreign workers, include both men and women, commuting daily through special check-posts set up for them. Trans-border movement is thus facilitated, even on a daily basis, subject to the migrant labourers dutifully going through the process. There are reported cases in which migrant labourers attempt to bypass this process. In 2020, for instance, 26 Indian workers were apprehended at the Pasakha border crossing while trying to cross back into India. They were not factory-employees from within the estate, but had laboured in other parts of the country. They had attempted to cross the border at Pasakha ‘without completing the necessary formalities to return to India.’ In this case, these formalities involved not only

the Government of Bhutan, but the Indian Embassy in Thimphu. A government press release qualified that while ‘there are no restrictions imposed by the government for foreign nationals who wish to exit Bhutan’, nationals of India are ‘required to register and complete formalities for their entry into India and travel to their place of residence’ (BBS, 2020).

Among the daily labour migrants from India are Sagar and Rajesh. They hail from the Central Dooars in West-Bengal. Every working day they walk to the Bhutan border, cross its check-point, and enter the factory in the Pasakha Industrial Estate where they are employed. Border-crossing is for them a routine activity. ‘We don’t own land in our village’, they share. ‘We live on tea company land. Our wives work in the tea-gardens. We would like to buy land of our own, which we try to earn in Bhutan.’ They appreciate that their salaries are always paid on time, which is unlike the experiences of some of their acquaintances working in similar companies in India. They also receive overtime compensation. For Sagar and Rajesh, working overtime is a strategy routinely resorted to in order to complement their salaries.

Jobs in their home area are hard to come by, and while they considered migrating to Kerala or Bangalore to find employment, they decided against it in the end. ‘Bhutan is much closer, and allows us to stay with our family.’ Sagar and Rajesh bring their own packed lunches from India, which they consume during lunch hour in Bhutan. Besides them, they are 20-odd other Indian nationals employed in the same factory. Like them, they travel in and out of Bhutan on every working day. Sagar and Rajesh start their daily journey at 6 in the morning by foot. By around 8AM they arrive at the Pasakha border cross-point. After crossing it, they board a factory bus that brings them to their workplace.

During summer their journeys are sometimes longer as the several streams

they need to cross swell with the monsoon rains. Their own settlement in India is vulnerable to flooding from the streams that run through India. Sagar shares how the Barsa, Singye, and Bhaljora Rivers that come out of Bhutan often flood in India. 'My own neighbour's house was washed away because of it.' Both Sagar and Rajesh have worked in Pasakha since 2012. They reflect on the changes: 'Pasakha has changed a lot, both physically and in terms of rules. Earlier, there were fewer houses and people. Now the area is overcrowded and rules have changed. When we first joined the factory, there were no checkpoints and document checks. Even those without identity cards could work here. Older people were also allowed to work, but this is no longer allowed now.' Rules have tightened, also for the protection and health of the labourers. Rajesh adds: 'Now we must undergo medical check-ups, and only those who are medically fit can work in the factories. We need to go to the medical checkpoint at Toorsa Khola, where X-rays, blood tests, and urine tests are conducted.'

Another daily worker in Pasakha, but coming from India, is Sonar. He is 35 years old and works at the Beverage factory. His permanent residence is in the Central Dooars Tea Basra Division in India. He described his daily routine as waking up at 5AM to, together with his wife, prepare breakfast and packed lunches for themselves and their children. Accompanied by a friend, also working in Pasakha, Sonar leaves his house at 7.15 on foot and arrives at the Pasakha border checkpoint by 8.30. He presents his documents upon entry and catch a company bus to the factory he works. The same bus drops him back to the checkpoint at 5.30PM. He then fulfils his exit formalities, walks home, and joins his family for dinner in the evening. In the border town of Phuentsholing, we also met a middle-aged woman from Jaigaon, across the India border. She was waiting for her contractor to arrive. She said she had been commuting all her life. She was employed as a cleaner with the Phuentsholing Municipality, coming at 7am and returning home after 4pm.

She knew no other work. Waking up at 4am, she cooked and packed lunches for herself and her school-going children, then crossed the border for work. While her wage was 8000 Bhutanese Rupees a month (the same as INR), she found the employment attractive as it was legal, there was no harassment and wages were paid on time.

Conclusion

Bhutan has a small population and with an estimated poverty incidence of 17.8% in 2022 (Bhutan Multidimensional Poverty Index 2022), it fares much better compared to the rest of South Asia. Migrant workers form the backbone of the economy, performing relatively low-paid, manual jobs, which are generally not attractive to the locals, but also bringing in the skills the country lacks. Higher education in the fields of engineering and technology are only now slowly being developed in the country. At the same time, for the migrant workers, the adherence to law and regulation is a major attraction – their work is legal and legitimate, and even when relatively low paid, it remains secure. Migrants are often used to being cheated in other contexts as in the Gulf countries and forced to enter illegally into Europe, with the threat of deportation constantly hanging over them. Bhutan then offers them a safe destination, one that is not precarious – standing up to its reputation as the land of happiness.

References

- Business Bhutan. 2023. 'Foreign Workers Influx Increase.' September 1. Url: <https://businessbhutan.bt/foreign-workers-influx-increase/>
- Bhutan Broadcasting Services, 26 Foreign Workers Apprehended in Pasakha. July 10, 2020.

Poussot, Jaquelyn. 2018. 'Indian Labourers, the Invisible Class of Bhutan.' LSE South Asia Centre Blog. Url: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/01/31/indian-labourers-the-invisible-class-of-bhutan/>

Wijunamai, Roderick. 2020. 'Migrant construction workers in Bhutan: Understanding Immigrant flows and their perceptions.' *Rig Tshoel: Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College* 3(1): 46-57.