



DENIAL OF LAND RIGHTS AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW HOME: MIGRATION FROM NEPAL TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

The Nepali population forms an important component of Indian society, contributing significantly to India's social, economic, and military life. While some scholars argue that Nepali-speaking communities became part of India due to historical territorial realignments, a much larger migration occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of acute socio-economic pressures within Nepal. This paper examines the agrarian conditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nepal to understand the structural factors that compelled large sections of the peasantry to migrate to India in search of livelihood and security. It focuses primarily on the Raikar land tenure system and the Jagirdari arrangement, under which proprietary rights over land were concentrated in the hands of the state and privileged elites, while cultivators were denied substantive land rights and reduced to conditions resembling serfdom. Heavy agrarian taxation, arbitrary rent extraction, debt bondage, high interest rates, enslavement, and systems of compulsory and unpaid labour such as Jhara and Hulak further intensified peasant impoverishment and insecurity. These conditions eroded the agrarian base of Nepal and generated widespread displacement. Simultaneously, the expansion of British colonial power in India created a growing demand for disciplined military and civilian labour, which coincided with the availability of distressed Nepali peasants. The paper argues that Nepali migration to India was the outcome of this historical conjuncture, shaped by agrarian distress, coercive state practices, and colonial labour demands. Over time, this migration evolved from a survival strategy into a permanent socio-economic phenomenon, laying the foundations for the long-term settlement of Nepali communities in India.

Keywords: Nepali migration; land rights; agrarian structure; Raikar and Jagirdari systems; peasant impoverishment.

I. Introduction:

Land has historically constituted the principal foundation of livelihood, social hierarchy, and economic power in agrarian societies. Control over land and access to its produce have largely determined the material conditions of cultivators and shaped broader patterns of social inequality, mobility, and displacement. In contexts where peasants were denied secure rights



over land and subjected to excessive extraction by the state and privileged elites, agrarian life often became marked by chronic insecurity and impoverishment. Such structural pressures frequently compelled rural populations to seek alternative spaces for survival, resulting in migration across political boundaries (Regmi, 1978; Wolf, 1966). The experience of Nepal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides a significant historical example of how agrarian distress and the denial of land rights generated large-scale population movements, particularly towards India.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Nepal was overwhelmingly agrarian in character, with agriculture forming the backbone of the economy and the principal source of state revenue. Despite the centrality of cultivation to economic life, proprietary rights over land were largely concentrated in the hands of the state and a narrow section of privileged groups. The dominant land tenure arrangements especially the Raikar system and associated grants such as Birta and Jagir did not recognize individual ownership rights for cultivators. Instead, peasants were granted limited rights of use and cultivation, while the surplus extracted from agriculture accrued mainly to non-cultivating elites such as nobles, priests, officials, and military personnel (Regmi, 1976). This hierarchical agrarian structure relegated the peasantry to a position of acute vulnerability, where their continued access to land depended on the favour of landlords and state authorities rather than on legally guaranteed rights.

The process of political unification and territorial expansion under the Gorkhali state further intensified agrarian pressures. Large tracts of land were redistributed as Jagir grants to civil and military personnel in lieu of cash salaries, thereby expanding elite control over land and labour. These arrangements exposed cultivators to arbitrary rent demands, increasing taxation, and the constant threat of eviction. The extraction of surplus from the peasantry was accompanied by the imposition of coercive practices such as debt bondage, enslavement, and compulsory labour systems, notably Jhara and Hulak, which required unpaid service to the state (Stiller, 1993; Regmi, 1978). Together, these practices severely eroded the agrarian base and reduced many cultivators to conditions resembling serfdom.

At the same time, the nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation and expansion of British colonial power in India, creating a growing demand for labour and military manpower.



The expansion of plantation economies, infrastructure projects, mining activities, and the colonial army required disciplined and inexpensive labour, a demand that coincided with the worsening socio-economic conditions in Nepal. British colonial authorities increasingly viewed Nepali labour and soldiers as particularly suitable for employment in difficult terrain and frontier regions, especially after encounters during the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–15 (Caplan, 1995). This convergence of agrarian distress in Nepal and labour demand in colonial India produced strong push and pull factors that shaped the pattern of Nepali migration across the border.

Against this historical backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between agrarian conditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nepal and the migration of Nepali peasants to India. By focusing on land tenure systems, the denial of land rights, and coercive state practices, the paper interprets migration not merely as a voluntary movement of people but as a historically conditioned response to structural inequalities, political domination, and changing economic opportunities within a colonial context (Skeldon, 2008).

II. Objectives of the Study: The main objectives in this paper are -

- a) To examine the agrarian structure and land tenure systems of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nepal, with particular emphasis on the denial of land rights and its impact on peasant livelihoods.
- b) To analyze how agrarian distress and coercive state practices contributed to the migration of Nepali peasants to India in search of livelihood and security.

III. Methodology:

The present study adopts a historical and qualitative research methodology to examine the relationship between agrarian conditions in eighteenth and nineteenth century Nepal and the migration of Nepali peasants to India. Given the historical nature of the inquiry, the study is based entirely on secondary sources, including administrative records, revenue documents, travel accounts, official reports, and published historical writings related to land tenure systems, agrarian relations, labour practices, and population movements in Nepal. Scholarly works by historians and social scientists have been consulted to analyze the functioning of land tenure



arrangements such as Raikar, Birta, and Jagirdari, as well as coercive practices including debt bondage, slavery, and compulsory labour under the Jhara and Hulak systems.

The study employs a thematic and interpretative analytical approach to identify the structural factors that contributed to peasant impoverishment and displacement. Agrarian distress, denial of land rights, excessive taxation, and coercive labour obligations are examined as key push factors influencing migration, while the expanding demand for labour and military service in colonial India is treated as a significant pull factor. By situating these dynamics within the broader context of state formation in Nepal and colonial expansion in India, the study interprets migration as a historically conditioned response to structural inequalities rather than a purely voluntary movement.

IV. Review of Literature:

Scholarly discussions on agrarian relations and peasant migration have long emphasized the centrality of land in shaping social hierarchy, economic security, and mobility in pre-industrial societies. Studies in agrarian history suggest that where cultivators were denied secure rights over land and subjected to excessive extraction by the state or landed elites, rural society was marked by chronic poverty and displacement (Wolf, 1966). Within South Asia, unequal land relations and coercive agrarian systems have been widely recognized as key structural forces driving peasant migration (Breman, 1996). The historical experience of Nepal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fits squarely within this broader analytical framework.

The most authoritative and comprehensive studies on Nepal's agrarian structure are those by Mahesh Chandra Regmi. Regmi's pioneering works provide a detailed account of land tenure systems such as Raikar, Birta, and Jagir, demonstrating that the Nepali state claimed ultimate ownership over land while cultivators were granted only usufruct rights (Regmi, 1976). According to Regmi (1978), the Raikar system constituted the backbone of Nepal's agrarian economy, yet it systematically denied peasants permanent and legally secure occupancy rights. This arrangement enabled the state and privileged elites to appropriate agricultural surplus, while cultivators remained vulnerable to eviction, rent hikes, and arbitrary exactions. Regmi's analysis firmly establishes the denial of land rights as a structural feature of Nepal's agrarian order rather than an accidental outcome.



Subsequent scholars have extended Regmi's analysis by linking agrarian relations to the process of state formation and territorial expansion. Stiller (1993) argues that the unification of Nepal under the Gorkhali state intensified the exploitation of land and labour, as the expanding state required resources to sustain its military campaigns. The Jagirdari system, through which land was granted to military and civil officials in lieu of cash salaries, played a crucial role in reinforcing elite domination over land and labour. Stiller highlights that these arrangements exposed cultivators to higher rents and increased taxation, further eroding their subsistence base. This literature underscores that agrarian exploitation in Nepal was closely tied to political and military imperatives.

The coercive dimensions of Nepal's agrarian system have received sustained attention in studies focusing on forced labour, debt, and bondage. Regmi (1978) documents the prevalence of compulsory labour systems such as Jhara and Hulak, under which commoners were required to provide unpaid service for state projects, military logistics, and transportation. These obligations frequently disrupted agricultural activities and placed immense burdens on peasant households. Scholars have further shown that the absence of secure land rights forced peasants to depend on moneylenders during periods of distress, often at exorbitant rates of interest (Blaikie, Cameron, & Seddon, 1980). Over time, indebtedness translated into labour bondage, with peasants compelled to work for creditors in order to service their debts.

The problem of slavery and forced displacement during the Gorkhali and early Rana periods has also been addressed in historical scholarship. Studies drawing on British administrative records and travel accounts reveal that enslavement was a widespread practice, often linked to rebellion, debt, and state repression (Regmi, 1978). Rebels against Gorkhali authority were frequently punished through enslavement, and women and children were particularly vulnerable. British observers reported the sale of Nepali slaves in border regions such as Haridwar, indicating the cross-border dimensions of coercion and displacement (Marshall, 1871). This body of literature highlights that migration from Nepal was not always voluntary but was often intertwined with violence and forced movement.

Migration from Nepal to India has been examined more systematically within the literature on colonial labour regimes. Caplan (1995) situates Nepali migration within the context of British



imperial expansion, arguing that colonial authorities increasingly viewed Nepali labour and soldiers as disciplined, resilient, and suitable for frontier and hill regions. The recruitment of Gorkhas into the British army following the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–15 institutionalized migration and created enduring channels of mobility. Similarly, Skeldon (2008) conceptualizes Nepali migration as part of wider patterns of labour mobility shaped by structural inequalities, rather than individual choice alone.

Historians of colonial India have emphasized the pull factors that complemented agrarian distress in Nepal. The nineteenth century witnessed expanding demands for labour in plantations, mining, road construction, and hill stations such as Darjeeling (Kumar, 1994). These emerging colonial economic spaces absorbed large numbers of Nepali migrants, who gradually established settlements and social networks. Scholars argue that while colonial labour regimes were exploitative, they often offered comparatively greater economic security than conditions prevailing in rural Nepal (Breman, 1996).

Some scholars have offered alternative explanations for the presence of Nepali-speaking populations in India, emphasizing territorial realignments rather than migration. They argue that regions such as Kumaon, Garhwal, and Sikkim were historically linked to Nepal and that their incorporation into British India transformed resident populations into Indian subjects without physical movement (Caplan, 1995). While this perspective accounts for certain regional cases, most scholars agree that it cannot explain the scale and spread of Nepali settlement across India. The dominant view in the literature remains that large-scale migration during the nineteenth century was primarily driven by agrarian distress and coercive state practices in Nepal, reinforced by colonial labour demand in India.

More recent studies adopt a political economy approach that integrates agrarian history with migration studies. These works emphasize the interconnectedness of land relations, state power, and labour mobility, interpreting migration as a survival strategy adopted under conditions of dispossession and exploitation (Skeldon, 2008). This approach moves beyond simplistic push–pull models and highlights how historical processes and unequal power relations shaped long-term migration and settlement patterns.



Overall, the existing literature provides substantial insights into Nepal's agrarian structure, the denial of land rights, and the coercive mechanisms that undermined peasant livelihoods. At the same time, studies on colonial labour regimes illuminate the structural pull factors that facilitated Nepali migration to India. However, there remains scope for integrative analyses that explicitly link agrarian distress in Nepal with migration as a historically conditioned response to structural inequalities. The present study builds upon this scholarship by situating Nepali migration within the combined contexts of agrarian exploitation and colonial labour demand.

V. Results and Discussion:

5.1 Agrarian Structure and Land Tenure Systems

a) State Ownership and Denial of Land Rights

The agrarian structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nepal was predominantly shaped by the Raikar land tenure system, under which ultimate ownership of land rested with the state. Cultivators were granted only limited rights to use and cultivate land, without any legally guaranteed proprietary or permanent occupancy rights. This arrangement placed peasants in a position of constant insecurity, as their continued access to land depended largely on the will of state authorities and dominant social groups. The denial of substantive land rights meant that peasants could not exercise control over the land they tilled, nor could they safeguard their livelihoods against arbitrary eviction or rent enhancement.

b) Elite Control and Peasant Marginalization

The impact of this land tenure system on peasant livelihoods was profound. While peasants performed the primary labour of cultivation, the benefits of landownership were enjoyed mainly by non-cultivating elites such as Brahmans, nobles, priests, officials, and military personnel. After meeting production costs and minimal subsistence requirements, the surplus generated from agriculture was extracted from the peasantry through rent and taxation. This unequal distribution of agrarian surplus entrenched poverty among cultivators and reinforced a rigid hierarchical agrarian order in which peasants occupied the lowest rung.



c) Jagirdari Expansion and Loss of Tenurial Security

The situation further deteriorated with the expansion of the Jagirdari system following the political unification of Nepal. Large tracts of land were granted to military and administrative personnel in lieu of cash salaries, converting cultivators into rent-paying tenants under jagirdars. This system exposed peasants to excessive and often arbitrary rent demands, frequently exceeding officially prescribed rates. The loss of relatively free access to land and the concentration of control in the hands of jagirdars reduced peasants to conditions resembling serfdom. Their security on land became contingent upon the jagirdar's relationship with the state, leaving cultivators without institutional protection or legal recourse.

d) Tax Burden and Agrarian Exploitation

In addition to rent extraction, heavy taxation further undermined peasant livelihoods. Since privileged groups such as Birta owners and jagirdars were often exempted from regular taxes, the financial burden of the state fell disproportionately on the common peasantry. This unequal fiscal structure intensified agrarian distress and made subsistence increasingly difficult. Thus, the agrarian structure and land tenure systems of Nepal systematically denied peasants secure land rights, resulting in chronic impoverishment and livelihood insecurity.

5.2 Agrarian Distress and Migration to India

a) Debt, Bondage, and Economic Insecurity

The denial of land rights and the extractive agrarian system created severe economic pressures that compelled peasants to seek alternatives beyond agriculture. One of the most significant outcomes of this distress was the widespread indebtedness of cultivators. The underdeveloped monetized economy and scarcity of cash forced peasants to borrow money at extremely high interest rates, often reaching 25 percent in cash and 50 percent in kind. Moreover, peasants cultivating Jagir land were required to provide advance payments or loans to landowners, further intensifying their financial burden. This cycle of debt frequently resulted in labour bondage, as peasants were compelled to work for moneylenders to repay loans.



b) Compulsory Labour and State Coercion

Coercive state practices significantly exacerbated peasant vulnerability. Systems of compulsory and unpaid labour, such as Jhara and Hulak, imposed heavy demands on the population. Peasants were forced to provide labour for military service, transportation of supplies, and construction projects, often at the cost of their own agricultural activities. The coercive enforcement of these systems, including the forced participation of women and minors, disrupted household economies and deepened agrarian distress. The increasing extraction of labour and revenue by the state made survival within the agrarian economy increasingly untenable for large sections of the peasantry.

c) Slavery, Displacement, and Forced Migration

The prevalence of enslavement further contributed to displacement and migration. Peasants burdened by debt or accused of rebellion against Gorkhali rule were often subjected to captivity and slavery. Women and children were particularly vulnerable, and in many cases individuals were sold across the border into India. Although slavery was officially banned in 1837, its reintroduction under the Rana regime intensified insecurity and displacement. These practices not only reduced the peasant population in certain regions but also created forced channels of cross-border movement.

d) Colonial Demand and Settlement in India

These push factors within Nepal coincided with expanding opportunities in colonial India. The nineteenth century witnessed a growing demand for labour and military manpower in British India, particularly in plantations, mining, infrastructure projects, and the colonial army. Nepali migrants were perceived as disciplined, resilient, and well-suited to difficult terrains, making them desirable within the colonial economy. Employment opportunities arising from military campaigns and the development of hill stations provided accessible avenues for migration. Over time, this movement evolved from short-term labour migration into permanent settlement, as migrants established social networks and identified India as their new homeland.



VI. Conclusion:

The study clearly establishes that the migration of Nepali peasants to India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not an isolated or voluntary phenomenon but the outcome of deeply rooted structural inequalities within Nepal's agrarian and political systems. The dominance of the Raikar land tenure system, coupled with the expansion of Jagirdari arrangements, denied cultivators substantive land rights and concentrated control over land in the hands of the state and privileged elites. As a result, peasants were reduced to a position of chronic insecurity, where their livelihoods depended on arbitrary authority rather than legally protected rights.

The persistent extraction of surplus through heavy taxation, excessive rent demands, and the exemption of elite groups from fiscal obligations intensified agrarian distress. This situation was further aggravated by widespread indebtedness, high interest rates, and the emergence of debt bondage, which extended to women and children. Coercive state practices such as compulsory labour under the Jhara and Hulak systems and the reintroduction of slavery under the Rana regime compounded peasant vulnerability, disrupting agricultural life and undermining subsistence security. These conditions rendered survival within the agrarian economy increasingly untenable for large sections of the rural population.

At the same time, the expansion of British colonial power in India created a sustained demand for labour and military manpower, offering an alternative livelihood space for displaced Nepali peasants. The convergence of agrarian distress in Nepal and labour opportunities in colonial India generated powerful push and pull factors that shaped a continuous flow of migration. Over time, this movement evolved from a short-term survival strategy into a permanent socio-economic process, leading to the long-term settlement of Nepali communities across various regions of India.

In conclusion, Nepali migration to India must be understood as a historically conditioned response to the denial of land rights, coercive state practices, and colonial labour demands. By linking agrarian history with migration, the study highlights the central role of land relations and state power in shaping patterns of displacement and settlement. Such an understanding not only



deepens insight into the historical experiences of Nepali migrants but also underscores the enduring significance of land rights and agrarian justice in determining social stability and human mobility.

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