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Migration and Changing Intergenerational Relationships in a Western Village of Nepal

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Abstract

International labour migration has become one of the most important social forces reshaping rural life in Nepal, transforming not only the material conditions of households but also the intimate architecture of family relationships across generations. While a substantial body of scholarship has examined the economic dimensions of Nepalese labour migration—remittance flows, poverty reduction, and women's household autonomy—far less attention has been paid to its effects on intergenerational relationships: the bonds of authority, obligation, care, and cultural transmission that connect older and younger members of migrant families. This article addresses that gap through qualitative fieldwork conducted in Narethanti village, Baglung district, Western Nepal. Drawing on life history interviews, a household survey, and key informant interviews with 45 respondents across 30 migrant households, the study investigates why young people choose to migrate, how migration reshapes their relationship with agrarian livelihoods and birth-ascribed social status, and how sustained absence from the village widens the cultural and value system gulf between generations. The findings reveal a dual process of liberation and rupture. Migration enables young people to achieve economic independence that surpasses anything their parents had accumulated over a lifetime, and to escape the caste- and clan-based hierarchies that have historically defined social worth in the village. Yet this emancipation carries costs: prolonged exposure to caste-free labour markets abroad and to urban lifestyles erodes young migrants' commitment to traditional cultural practices and deepens their estrangement from the world their parents inhabit. Elderly parents experience this as neglect; migrant children experience it as the natural consequence of a life lived across radically different cultural worlds. The article argues that labour migration in Nepal is not merely a livelihood strategy but a profound social and cultural transformation—one that is fundamentally reordering intergenerational bonds, reshaping family structures, and generating new forms of tension around identity, belonging, and the ethics of care.

Keywords

Social security, Worker rights, NREGA, Gig Worker, Unorganized sector.

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1. Introduction

Nepal has emerged as one of the most migration-intensive societies in Asia. Remittances now constitute a substantial proportion of the country's GDP, and the steady outflow of young men from rural villages to labour markets in the Gulf, Malaysia, Japan, and increasingly to Europe, Australia, and North America has transformed the material foundations of rural life in ways that were unimaginable a generation ago. Yet for all the economic visibility of this phenomenon, its social consequences remain comparatively understudied. Most scholarly attention has concentrated on what migration does to household incomes, to poverty levels, and to the position of women in the domestic sphere. Far less has been written about what migration does to the relationships between generations—to the bonds of authority, reciprocity, obligation, and cultural transmission that connect the old and the young within migrant families and communities. It is this neglected dimension of Nepalese migration that the present article seeks to illuminate.

In rural Nepal, intergenerational relationships have historically been organized around three interlocking pillars: an agrarian economy in which land is both a livelihood and a form of social capital; a caste system that ascribes social status at birth and governs the terms of interaction across communities; and a patriarchal family structure in which authority flows from elder to younger, and in which the care of aged parents is understood as a fundamental obligation of adult children. These pillars are mutually reinforcing. The young person who farms his father's land, observes caste protocol, and eventually inherits the household's social position is reproducing not just an economic arrangement but an entire moral order. Labour migration disrupts this order at every level simultaneously. It removes the most productive members of the community—predominantly young men in their most economically active years—and relocates them in social environments where land ownership is irrelevant, caste is invisible, and individual skill and economic performance determine worth. The cultural and psychological consequences of this relocation, when migrants return to their villages on vacation or permanently, are profound and far-reaching.

Scholars of migration and acculturation have long recognized that the movement between cultures involves not just economic adjustment but a fundamental reorientation of values, identity, and social behaviour (Berry, 2005). For Nepalese migrants, who travel predominantly as individuals rather than as family units, this process of acculturation is particularly acute. Renzaho *et al.*, (2017) identify four broad orientations that migrants may adopt in relation to their

home and host cultures: traditional separation, assimilation, bicultural integration, and marginalization. In the Nepalese context, evidence suggests that many migrants occupy an unstable middle ground—neither fully assimilated into the culture of their destination country nor able to simply resume their former place in the village upon return. Yamanaka (2005) captures this vividly in her description of Nepalese transmigrants in Japan experiencing “reverse culture shock” when they return home, finding themselves disoriented by the contrast between the pace and norms of urban Japan and the rhythms and obligations of rural Nepal. What has received less systematic attention is how this cultural dislocation plays out within the family—specifically, how it shapes the relationships between returning or absent migrants and the older generation they have left behind.

The structural consequences for family composition add further complexity to this picture. As Speck & Müller-Böker, (2020) observe, migration produces far-reaching changes in family life: modified living arrangements, redefined roles and statuses, redistributed domestic labour, and a marked erosion of intergenerational care and support. In Nepal, a distinctive and increasingly visible pattern has emerged in which the families of migrant workers do not simply wait in the village but gradually relocate to nearby towns and cities—wives and children moving in search of better schools and urban amenities while husbands continue to labour abroad. The result is a “triple adjustment” (Yamanaka, 2005): the migrant adapts to a foreign cultural environment, his wife and children socialize into an urban Nepali world, and elderly parents remain in the village, deprived simultaneously of the labour, the company, and the intergenerational care that a joint family would have provided. This spatial fragmentation of the family is not merely a logistical inconvenience; it reflects and accelerates a deeper transformation in the moral economy of intergenerational obligation.

2. Objectives of the Study

This article tries to investigate the dynamics in intergenerational relationships through an empirical study of Narethanti village in Baglung district, Western Nepal—a community with a multi-generational history of labour migration that makes it an especially productive site for examining the long-run social consequences of outmigration. The central research question is: How does international labour migration reshape intergenerational relationships within migrant households in rural Nepal? Following three subsidiary questions guide the analysis:

- ▶▶ *First*, what motivates young people to migrate, and how do those motivations reflect a broader disenchantment with agrarian life and birth-ascribed social status?
- ▶▶ *Second*, how does migration alter young people’s economic and social independence from their parents? and
- ▶▶ *Third*, how does sustained exposure to foreign cultural environments widen the value-system gulf between migrant youth and the older generation in the

village, and what tensions does this generate around identity, cultural practice, and the ethics of care?

3. Labour Migration, Family and Intergenerational Relations: A Review of Literature

The main thrust of the labour migration from Nepal is the collection of cash because it is an important sign of success in a capitalist society. Holding land and owning property is important, but so too is command over cash, and wealth is a central requirement in most styles of masculinity. It is about earning cash and reputation (Gaurav, 2014; Osella & Osella, 2000). Labour migration is not only about empowerment, economic return, changes in consumption, changes in livelihood, women's autonomy in households, and participation in the public sphere; however, these things are embedded with risks and significant socio-cultural stresses (Sinjapati, Lama, *et al.* 2017; Adhikary, Shepherd, *et al.* 2018; Bossavie and Denisova, 2018).

In the age of globalization, the reduction in costs of travel, improvement of communication systems, internationalization of capital, and economic growth have led to a substantial increase in the scale and complexity of international migration. The migrants' ways of perceiving, navigating, and managing changes within their family dynamics and intergenerational relationships can be very stressful in the post-migration phase. This occurs due to the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members. Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that involves various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and socio-cultural adaptations between the groups (Berry, 2005). Since labour migration from Nepal is predominantly by males and individuals, the acculturation process is mostly individual rather than in a group. Consequently, the role of contextual factors in individual behaviour is often mediated by interactions in different social networks to which individuals belong (Anderson, 2022: 263), with many facing difficulties establishing social networks, finding accommodation or employment, learning English, and looking after their general health. Renzaho *et al.* (2017) identify four cultural orientations related to the home culture and the host culture: (1) Traditional or separation (maintaining loyalty to traditional culture and not recognizing the host/dominant culture); (2) Assimilation (rejects traditional culture and fully embraces the host/dominant culture); (3) Integration or bicultural orientation (retaining cultural identity while simultaneously joining the dominant society); and (4) Marginalization (rejecting traditional culture and failing to connect with the host/dominant culture by exclusion or withdrawal). Nepalese migrants experience the 'reverse culture shock' of the change from the fast life and bright lights of urban Japan to the routines of Nepal and responsibilities there (Yamanaka, 2005). Notwithstanding the challenges of varying acculturation trajectories (despite many conflicts), migrant families were able to develop strategies for handling

intergenerational conflicts through learning, making compromises, accepting some cultural changes, adapting to new social expectations, and recognizing that migrant children were not inherently at fault for differences in cultural value sets and behaviours, for example. These strategies helped migrants to improve their post-migration family balance (Ayika *et al.*, 2018).

The family dynamics certainly are affected directly after young males leave and are absent from household chores. It changes the decision-making, child dependence, and gendered division of housework (Heidi, 2006). Given that context, migrant workers who visit foreign lands get exposure to diverse cultures, wider perspectives, and new social networks, and gain new skills and experiences that empower them, enhancing their self-confidence and decision-making capabilities. Aside from cross-border movements, internal migration, chiefly from rural to urban areas and from the hills to the plains, is also an important type of human mobility that is linked to the development of Nepal. Internal migration has played a major role in redistributing population along the Terai and the Hills and between rural and urban areas. Further, the population of youth, who are comparatively mobile, has increased in urban areas compared to the past (Ghimire & Upreti, 2012). This mobility indeed forces a person to leave the previous cultural practices and engage with new socio-cultural worldviews. The loss of social capital by migrant returnees in their community, context, time, and places may be problematic for themselves, their children, and aged people in the family in the short term. Currently, one of the most visible cases, often related to international labour migration, is internal migration, where the migrant's family (wife & children) leaves villages and begins to stay in nearby cities. This makes a 'triple adjustment' within a joint family. A husband becomes accustomed to a foreign land's culture, wife and children become socialized in nearby cities, and aged people who are left behind in the villages are forced to habituate to living alone in their location. Changes in the family include modified living arrangements, a redefinition of roles and status, a redistribution of work among family and household members, changes in the attitude of younger people towards older people, and a decline in intergenerational care and support (Speck and Müller-Böker, 2020).

4. Research Methods

The study adopts an exploratory and interpretive qualitative research design, a choice that is not merely methodological convention but a substantive epistemological commitment. Understanding how intergenerational relationships change as a result of labour migration cannot be accomplished through survey instruments alone, however well-designed. The phenomena at stake—the erosion of parental authority, the quiet withdrawal of young migrants from caste obligations, the grief of elderly parents who find their children emotionally and culturally unreachable on return, the ambivalence of migrant youth torn between obligation to family and commitment to a newly acquired worldview—are experiences that resist quantification and demand instead sustained, empathetic engagement with the

people who live them. Life history and interview methods are particularly well suited to this task because they allow respondents to narrate change over time, to reflect on the meanings they attach to migration and its consequences, and to articulate the tensions they experience in their own words. The household and the community are taken as dual units of analysis, enabling the study to move fluidly between the intimate scale of family dynamics and the wider social and cultural context in which those dynamics unfold.

Fieldwork was conducted in Narethanti village, Baglung district, Western Nepal—a community whose multi-generational history of outmigration to destinations spanning India, the Gulf, Malaysia, Japan, and beyond makes it an unusually productive site for tracing the long-run social consequences of labour migration. Thirty migrant households were selected for in-depth study, and 45 respondents (25 male and 20 female) were drawn purposively to capture the caste, gender, and generational diversity of the community: Chhetri (37.78%), artisan caste groups (26.67%), Magar (20%), and Brahmin (15.55%) households were represented. Researchers prioritized returned and retired migrants, whose reflective distance from the migration experience enriched the analytical depth of their narratives, while the study also gave equal weight to the perspectives of women and elderly respondents left behind in the village—voices whose accounts of absence, changed authority, and declining intergenerational care are indispensable to any complete understanding of what migration does to families. Three methods were used in combination. A structured household survey generated the socio-economic baseline, documenting land ownership, occupational patterns, food sufficiency, and educational attainment, and revealed the demographic scale of the phenomenon: nearly half of all male household members (47.93%) were engaged in foreign labour migration, while the majority of women (51.16%) remained in the village bearing the primary burden of agricultural work. Life history interviews—conducted in an unstructured, conversational style and supplemented by telephone conversations with migrants currently abroad—formed the analytical core of the study, tracing individual trajectories of migration and return against the backdrop of shifting family relationships, changing values, and contested obligations. Key informant interviews with teachers, journalists, political leaders, and community figures provided contextual depth and historical perspective, situating individual narratives within the longer arc of social change in Narethanti.

Analysis proceeded thematically, with close attention paid to the contrast between the worldviews of older and younger respondents. Older participants consistently narrated their identities through the language of land, caste membership, collective obligation, and agrarian practice; younger migrants, by contrast, spoke the language of individual skill, economic achievement, urban aspiration, and personal freedom. These contrasting registers are not simply rhetorical differences—they reflect a genuine and deepening divergence in the values, priorities, and social orientations of two generations whose life experiences have been shaped by radically different social environments. The researcher's own

membership in the Narethanti community is acknowledged as a double-edged methodological condition: it opened doors to candid narration and facilitated the kind of trust that sustained life history work requires, while also necessitating careful reflexive attention throughout analysis to ensure that familiarity did not become a source of interpretive partiality. The fieldwork was conducted in 2011, and while the specific institutional arrangements described here reflect that historical moment, the social processes they document—the generational fracture around values and care, the cultural estrangement of migrant youth, the structural isolation of elderly parents—remain fundamental features of the ongoing experience of labour migration in rural Nepal, and the findings retain their analytical relevance for understanding migration-driven social change across the region.

5. Findings: Labour Migration Family Dynamics and Changing Intergenerational Relationships

Labour migration has become one of the most transformative forces shaping social life in Narethanti. Its effects are not confined to household economics but penetrate deep into the relationships between generations - altering the distribution of authority, reshaping aspirations, eroding traditional values, and producing a young generation that is simultaneously empowered and displaced. The findings below trace these changes across five interconnected dimensions, drawing on the life histories and narratives of respondents across age groups, caste backgrounds, and migration experiences.

5.1 Intergenerational Dynamics in a Migrating Village

The village of Narethanti has changed dramatically over the past two to three decades. The spread of education, the arrival of roads, electricity, and mobile phones, and the steady outflow of young men to foreign countries have together transformed the social landscape in ways that were unimaginable to the older generation. The most visible expression of this transformation is a growing tension between two ways of life: the agrarian, collectively oriented, and caste-structured world of the elders, and the individualistic, urban-aspiring, and achievement-oriented world of the young. The present young generation holds a strong repulsion toward the former and an equally strong enthusiasm for the latter. This generational divergence, rooted in genuinely different life experiences and social horizons, forms the central thread running through all the findings reported below. What was once a practice of middle-class households—sending one son abroad to supplement the farming income—has now crossed all class boundaries, with at least one member of almost every household in the village working outside Nepal. The entire productive population is, in effect, engaged in a collective effort to alter the material and social foundations of their lives.

5.1.1 Why Young People Leave: Aspirations and Frustrations

The decision to migrate is rarely the product of a single calculation. It emerges from the accumulation of daily frustrations, observed comparisons, inherited

expectations, and the slow recognition that the life available in the village falls far short of what young people believe they deserve and are capable of achieving. Two themes dominated the accounts of young respondents when explaining their motivations: a fundamental rejection of the agrarian economy as a viable or dignified livelihood, and a deep dissatisfaction with the caste-based social hierarchy that continues to govern village relationships.

►► Farming as Burden for Youth

Young respondents spoke about farming not with nostalgia or attachment but with a mixture of exhaustion and resignation—as something their parents did because they had no choice, not something they themselves were willing to inherit. The land, in their telling, demands everything and returns very little. Jivan Khatri, who left for Malaysia six years before the interview, described the experience of growing up in a farming household in terms that were frank and unsentimental:

We worked hard - all of us, every season. But even with twelve ropani of land and six people working it, the harvest was barely eighteen muri altogether. The livestock gave us milk and a few goats to sell, but we still had to buy meat. We had no irrigated land, so rice had to come from remittance. Half the year we were depending on daily wage labour just to eat. I watched that for years and thought - what is the point? I went to Malaysia. My two brothers are there now too. Our parents are still farming. We keep telling them, just stop, let it go. But they will not hear of it. For them, the land is everything. For us, it is just hard work that goes nowhere.

The intergenerational disagreement Jivan describes—children urging parents to abandon cultivation, parents refusing—captures in miniature the broader value conflict between the generations. Narayan Kunwar's account adds a further dimension, showing how farming households that do not migrate are not merely stagnating but actively losing ground:

My family had irrigated land once. But there was no other income, so when debts came, the land had to go. That is how it works here—you borrow to survive, and then you lose what little you had to pay back what you borrowed. I had wanted to continue my studies but that was finished. I went to Dubai. What I saw from Dubai onwards changed how I thought about everything. The households that only farm—they are shrinking. The households that have someone abroad—they are building houses in market areas, they are putting their children in better schools. The gap between them is growing every year. The land does not lie to you. It shows you exactly where you stand.

The logic Narayan articulates—that farming not only fails to generate prosperity but actively exposes households to dispossession—helps explain why young people in Narethanti do not view migration as a temporary supplement to agriculture but as a permanent alternative to it.

» Migration as a Means for Escaping the Caste Hierarchy

If the agrarian economy represents one set of constraints that young people seek to escape through migration, the caste-based social hierarchy represents another—and for Dalit youth in particular, often a more urgent one. In interviews, the generational contrast in attitudes toward caste was stark: the oldest respondents spoke of caste identity with conviction and defended its social logic, while the youngest treated it with indifference or open contempt. Young respondents across caste backgrounds reported that they had come to view birth-ascribed status as an obstacle rather than a foundation—something that limited rather than enabled their life chances. Among Dalit respondents, this sentiment was sharpest. Khadka BK described how, as a child, he had watched a relative's economic success transform his social standing in the village, planting in him an early understanding that money could do what caste could not:

My uncle had served in the Indian army and came back with some money. He bought irrigated land. He built a beautiful house. People treated him completely differently from how they treated us. Non-Dalit people who would not normally sit with us - they sat with him. They ate with him, drank with him, and went to the same parties. He was the same caste as us, but they could not treat him the way they treated us because he had money and property. I used to watch that as a boy and think - that is what I want. I want people to behave with me the way they behave with him. That is why I went to Saudi Arabia after my lower secondary. I just wanted to be free of all of it.

What Khadka's account reveals is that for Dalit youth, migration is not simply an economic decision but a social one—a strategy for escaping a relational order that assigns permanent inferiority on the basis of birth. The aspiration is not merely to earn more but to become someone whose worth cannot be dismissed on caste grounds. This desire for social dignity alongside economic improvement gives migration a particular urgency for Dalit young people that goes beyond the calculations of livelihood alone. More broadly, the dissatisfaction with both subsistence agriculture and birth-ascribed status has combined across caste lines to drive the productive population of Narethanti outward. But why specifically foreign migration rather than domestic alternatives? Respondents were clear: domestic employment is scarce, poorly paid, and uncertain. Sher Bahadur Pun placed his own decision to migrate within a three-generation history of outward movement that had become, in his family and across the village, simply the normal thing that men do:

My grandfather went to Assam. My father tried to join the Indian army - he did not make it, so he went to Delhi and worked in a hotel for twenty-three years. I have been in Qatar for three years now, in a manufacturing industry. Almost every household here has someone abroad. It is not strange anymore—it is just what happens. There is a saying here: a son goes abroad and a daughter goes to her husband's house. That is just the way it is. There is no work here

worth having. If you are lucky enough to find something, it pays so little you can barely keep yourself alive on it. We need to earn seriously, and that means going abroad. Here, you survive. There, you can actually build something.

Sher Bahadur's account captures something important: migration in Narethanti is no longer experienced as a rupture from the normal course of life but as its continuation. It is the expected path, normalized across generations, structurally compelled by the absence of domestic alternatives, and culturally sanctioned by community norms of masculine responsibility.

5.1.2 Shifting Power, Shifting Values in Family

The effects of labour migration on intergenerational relationships are wide-ranging and operate simultaneously at the economic, social, cultural, and structural levels. The findings in this section document five distinct but interrelated dimensions of change: the economic empowerment of young migrants relative to their parents; the cultivation of urban aspirations that diverge sharply from the old generation's attachment to village life; the erosion of parental social status as the basis of individual identity; the disconnection of migrant youth from traditional cultural practices; and the emergence of a transitional family form that fits neither the joint household of the past nor the nuclear household of the urban present.

» Economic Power and the Reversal of Household Authority

One of the most significant and structurally consequential effects of labour migration is the shift in economic power from the older to the younger generation within the household. Foreign employment—particularly in Japan, the Gulf, Europe, and Australia—generates incomes that in many cases exceed what the older generation earned over an entire working lifetime of farming and local labour. This economic transformation has direct consequences for the distribution of authority within the household: young men who return with savings, who purchase land and build houses, who send regular remittances that sustain the entire family, are no longer treated as junior members subordinate to parental authority. They become the effective heads of household decision-making, regardless of whether their fathers formally hold that title. In this study, four out of the seven youngest respondents had already doubled their households' landholdings and accumulated significant cash savings by their early thirties. These young men described being treated as executive members of their households, with no significant decision made without their agreement. Milan Khatri's account traces this transformation from its difficult beginnings through to its resolution in a complete reversal of household authority:

I was a big strong boy - people used to say I was like a wrestler. But after grade eight, I spent years trying to get into the British or Indian army and never made it. My father spent borrowed money trying to help me, and it came to nothing. For two years I did nothing. I was just there, sitting around, not earning anything, and not doing anything useful. My parents ignored me. My

older brother ignored me. I felt like a burden. Then my brother managed to go to Japan through a contact at a hotel in Delhi. He told me to come to Delhi and learn cooking at the same place. I did that for two years, and then he sent me a visa. I went to Japan. Three years there, and when I came back I was a different person. I bought land in Chitwan. We built a house. Now one brother is in Japan, one is in London. My father - he still calls himself the head of the house. And for small things, yes, he decides. But for anything important - buying land, a major expense, anything like that - he asks us. If we say no, he stops. He would never go against us on something serious. It is not that we disrespect him. We sit together, we discuss. But the final word is with us.

Milan's narrative illustrates how completely the axis of household authority can shift within a single generation, driven not by any formal change in family rules but by the simple fact of who controls the money.

►► The Village They No Longer Want to Return To

Economic empowerment through migration does not merely improve the material conditions of migrant households within the village—it redirects the geographic and cultural imagination of the young generation away from the village altogether. Young respondents were emphatic that their goal is not to strengthen their position in Narethanti but to leave it, at least in terms of permanent residence. The village features in their plans primarily as a place where elderly parents are supported financially, not as the destination of their own futures. Their aspirations are urban: a modern house in the Tarai or a nearby market town, a vehicle, connectivity, and a lifestyle that approximates what they have observed in their destination countries. Yam Karki described the progression of his ambitions with characteristic directness:

I grew up watching my uncle's household. He had been abroad, he had a modern house, solar panels, a television. My father had none of that - just farming and debt. When I got on the plane to Qatar, I had one plan: earn money, clear the debt, build a house in Hatiya Bazar. That was it. But while I was in Qatar, my brother-in-law helped me move to Japan. The salary there was on another level entirely. Japan changed everything. The way Japanese people live - almost everyone has a car, a real house, their own business or stable work. They are not just surviving, they are actually living. I want that. Not in Japan necessarily, but that kind of life. So I bought land in Bhairahawa. Built a house. It is rented out now while I work. Eventually I want to live there properly. The village—I will look after my parents, send money, visit. But I am not going back to farm.

This account stands in sharp contrast to the perspective of the old generation, which understood foreign earnings as a means of reinvesting in the village itself. Bhim Pun recalled that when his generation migrated, the money came back to buy land in the village, to strengthen the household's agricultural foundation. He told the

story of a porter whose son became a doctor as a parable - intended as a gentle rebuke to the young generation's desire to forget where they came from. For Bhim Pun and others of his generation, the farm is not just an occupation; it is the social medium through which relationships are maintained, through which one is known and respected in the community. Milan, an elderly farmer, spoke about his attachment to his land in a way that made clear he was not talking about economics at all:

I have farmed since I was a child. My father died young. I was the oldest, so I stayed - I could not go abroad. Nine people in this house depended on what I grew. I never thought of farming as just a job. When I have land, people come to work with me. My daughters-in-law go to return labour to neighbors. People come to borrow my oxen, to buy ghee, to ask about the harvest. That is a life - that is connection that is who I am in this village. If I have no farm and no livestock, what do I do with myself? Just sit? My sons say - stop farming, you are old, just rest. They do not understand. I have given my whole life to this land. When I walk to the field I feel something. I cannot explain it to them. They have never felt it. They just see hard work and low returns. I see my whole life there.

The divergence between Milan's sentimental and relational attachment to the land and his sons' purely instrumental view of it represents one of the deepest and most emotionally charged expressions of intergenerational conflict in this study.

► Foreign Experience Dissolves Inherited Social Identity

Migration does not only change what young people earn— it changes how they understand themselves and their place in the social order. In the village, an individual's social status is substantially determined by parental caste, clan, and class position - inherited attributes that precede any personal achievement and that continue to shape how others treat them regardless of individual conduct. In foreign countries, none of these attributes carry any weight. What matters is skill, performance, and the capacity to do the job. This daily experience of a meritocratic social order has a profound effect on the identities of young migrants, motivating them to question and ultimately reject the validity of birth-ascribed status upon returning home, and to raise the same questions within their communities. As Jivan Khatri put it plainly: your father's name gets you respect in the village, but it will not get you a job in Dubai. Yam Pun described what this realization looked like in practice during his time working in Thailand:

There were workers from dozens of countries where I was. Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, all over. Nobody knew anybody's caste. Nobody cared. It was not that people were being polite about it - it just genuinely did not exist there as a category. What mattered was whether you could do the work, whether you showed up, whether you were reliable. A man who performed well got a better position and better pay. That was it. I used to think about the village and how differently everything worked there—who your family is, what your caste is, what your grandfather did. All of that means

nothing there. And after a while, you start to think: why should it mean anything here either? When I came back, I could not take the caste stuff seriously anymore. I had spent years in a world where it simply did not exist.

The contrast Yam Pun draws between the two social orders is not merely observational—it is generative. The experience of living in a caste-free environment does not just change individual attitudes; it weakens the entire intergenerational mechanism through which caste identity is transmitted. The older generation's social capital—their accumulated local prestige, their caste standing, their place in the community's moral hierarchy—loses its value as an inheritance because the young generation no longer needs it and no longer believes in it.

» Cultural Disconnection and the Transmission Gap

Alongside the economic and social effects of migration, there is a quieter but equally significant cultural dimension: the progressive disconnection of migrant youth from the ritual, ceremonial, and value systems that constitute the cultural life of the village. This disconnection is not deliberate or ideological in most cases - it is the product of absence. When you are not there for Shradha, you do not learn how to perform it. When you spend your holidays celebrating New Year in a foreign city, the rhythm of the Hindu calendar fades from memory. Over years and decades, the village becomes something that exists primarily in recollection rather than in daily practice. Yam Pun described this process with unusual candor and self-awareness:

My family is in the village. My property is there. In my head, the village is always there. But the reality is that I am away almost all the time. I come back for three or four months every two or three years. That is it. When I am abroad, I am a worker. That is my whole identity there. Caste means nothing, clan means nothing. What matters is the job. In the early years, I used to feel it - the homesickness, the guilt about being away. But the work takes over. You get used to it. After years of this, I notice things when I come back. I eat with Dalit friends without thinking twice - I have been doing it for years abroad. My parents do not like it. They do not say much, but I can see it bothers them. And the rituals—Shradha, Aushi, Purnima—I honestly do not know how to perform them properly anymore. Nobody taught me and I was never there to observe. But I know when my Japanese colleagues' birthdays are. I celebrate New Year with them, Valentine's Day. Those are the rhythms I live by now.

The older generation experiences this cultural disconnection as abandonment—as evidence that the young have turned their backs not merely on farming but on the entire moral and relational world that the elders built and inhabited. Nar Bahadur Khatri gave voice to this sense of loss and grievance with an honesty that was painful to hear:

My children do not think about us. They think about their careers, their money, their futures. Fine - earn money that is good. But while you earn, you also

have to remember us. You have to look after us. They do not care about their caste or their ancestors. They do not care about the property we built through our whole lives. And now even their wives are gone - living in the city, saying it is for the children's schooling. There are schools here. Good schools, both government and private. The real reason is that they do not want the hardship of village life. So my sons are in Qatar and Japan, their wives are in Kathmandu and Chitwan, and we are here. Alone.

Yam Pun pushed back strongly against this characterization when it was put to him, insisting that the young generation's sacrifice is precisely what the old generation misreads as indifference:

People say we are selfish. That we only care about ourselves. But think about what we actually do. We leave our families. We leave our villages. We go to countries where we do not speak the language, where we know nobody, where we are at the bottom of everything. We do hard physical work for years. We send most of what we earn home. We miss our children growing up. We miss our parents getting old. We do all of this so that our families can live better. How is that selfish? The money we send—it builds houses, it pays school fees, it buys medicine. It is not just for me. It is for all of them. They do not see the sacrifice because they are not there for it.

This contested terrain—between the older generation's experience of neglect and the younger generation's self-understanding as selfless providers—captures the emotional and moral complexity at the heart of the intergenerational conflict that migration produces.

» Neither Here Nor There: A Generation Caught Between Worlds

The cumulative effect of all these changes—economic independence from parents, urban aspirations, cultural disconnection, and the erosion of caste identity—is a young generation that occupies a genuinely transitional position: no longer fully integrated into village life, not yet fully belonging to urban or transnational society either. Their ties to the village persist in the form of financial obligation and intermittent visits but have lost the density of daily social participation. Their relationships in urban Nepal remain relatively shallow. They are, in the fullest sense, between worlds.

This transitional condition is expressed not only in the attitudes and identities of young people but in the very structure of the household itself. The older generation separated households formally - a son would take his share of the parental property, establish his own hearth, and become the recognized head of a new unit. The present generation does neither. Migrants' wives and children drift toward towns and cities, drawn by schools, services, and the desire to escape village hardship, without formally claiming a share of the ancestral property. Elderly parents remain in the village home, financially supported by remittances but physically alone. The household exists on paper as a joint unit while functioning in practice as a dispersed

network of financially connected but residentially separated individuals. The situation of Til Bahadur Khatri's household makes this concrete. His family nominally comprises sixteen members: two elderly grandparents, four sons, one daughter, three daughters-in-law, and five grandchildren. The reality on the ground is very different:

Two of my sons are in Qatar, one is in Japan. The oldest daughter-in-law is living in Hatiya with three children. The middle one is in Chitwan with two children—they have their own house there now. My youngest son and my daughter are in Baglung for their studies. Here in the village, it is me, my wife, and one daughter-in-law. That is all. Sixteen people in the family and three of us are actually here. The sons send money—to their wives in the cities and to us here. They are good about that, I will not say otherwise. But it is quiet. Too quiet. This is not how a household is supposed to work.

What Til Bahadur describes is not merely a logistical arrangement but a social rupture. The household as a place of shared daily life—of meals together, of labour exchanged, of elders and grandchildren under the same roof—has been replaced by a financial circuit in which money flows across distances but people do not occupy the same space. This dispersed household form, increasingly common across Narethanti, represents one of the most structurally significant consequences of labour migration for intergenerational life in rural Nepal. In conclusion, labour migration in Narethanti has produced a young generation that is economically empowered, socially mobile, culturally hybrid, and structurally displaced. It has enabled them to challenge and in many cases escape the twin constraints of subsistence agriculture and birth-ascribed status that defined their parents' lives. But it has done so at a considerable social cost: the weakening of intergenerational bonds, the erosion of cultural transmission, the isolation of the elderly, and the emergence of a family form that sustains its members financially while struggling to sustain them relationally. The spirit of individualism that migration cultivates is not simply a personal orientation—it is a structural force that is progressively dissolving the collective identity that has historically held village life together.

6. Discussion

The findings presented in this article invite reflection on a paradox that lies at the heart of labour migration in rural Nepal: migration simultaneously strengthens and severs the family. It strengthens it materially—remittances fund houses, educate children, retire debts, and purchase land—while severing it culturally and morally, loosening the bonds of obligation, shared practice, and mutual recognition that have historically constituted intergenerational life in the village. Understanding this paradox requires moving beyond the economic frameworks that have dominated migration scholarship and engaging seriously with migration as a sociological phenomenon: a process that reorganizes social structures, transforms value systems, and produces new forms of inequality and solidarity within families and communities.

What the life histories gathered in Narethanti reveal, above all, is that labour migration is being experienced and understood by young people not merely as an economic strategy but as a project of social emancipation. For young men from Dalit and low-income households in particular, foreign labour migration represents the most viable pathway out of the twin constraints of subsistence agriculture and birth-ascribed social status—two systems that have historically defined not only what a person does but who they are. In destination countries where caste is invisible and individual skill determines economic reward, these young men discover a social world that validates the self they wish to become rather than the one their village has assigned them. This finding resonates strongly with (Osella & Osella, 2000) argument that migration in South Asia is deeply intertwined with masculinity and the aspiration to command cash and social recognition, and with (Gaurav, 2014) analysis of the cultural imaginaries of migration in Nepal, in which the act of going abroad is itself a performance of ambition, capability, and modernity. Migration, in this reading, is not a response to poverty alone; it is a bid for a different kind of social personhood.

Yet this bid for emancipation generates its own social costs, and these costs are distributed unequally across generations. The older generation—those who built their identities around land, agrarian labour, caste protocol, and the joint family—experiences the cultural withdrawal of migrant youth as a form of abandonment. The complaints recorded in the interviews are not simply expressions of personal hurt; they articulate a deeper sociological anxiety about the collapse of the intergenerational compact: the expectation that adult children will labour on the family land, observe ritual obligations, care for aged parents, and reproduce the household's social standing in the community. When young men return from Japan or Qatar eating with Dalits, dismissing caste protocols, investing their earnings in urban apartments rather than village land, and delegating farm decisions to elderly parents whom they barely consult, they are not merely behaving differently—they are withdrawing from the moral economy through which intergenerational relationships have been organized. This aligns with Speck and Müller-Böcker's (2020) observation that population aging in rural Nepal is compounding the isolation of elderly people as younger family members migrate, and points toward an emerging crisis of care that deserves greater attention in both policy and scholarship.

The concept of acculturation, as developed by (Berry, 2005) and applied to intergenerational migration contexts by (Renzaho *et al.*, 2017), is useful for naming the process through which these value-system divergences emerge, but it does not fully capture their sociological weight. Acculturation theory tends to frame cultural change as an individual psychological process of adaptation and adjustment. What the Narethanti data suggest, however, is that the cultural changes wrought by migration are not simply internal to the individual migrant; they are relational and structural. When a young man returns from abroad unable or unwilling to perform the ritual practices his parents expect of him, the rupture is not merely

psychological-it is a rupture in the social fabric of the household and community. The transmission of norms, values, and practices from one generation to the next-the very mechanism through which social reproduction occurs-is being interrupted. This is not merely a story of individual cultural disorientation; it is a story of structural social change in which the institutions that have historically organized rural Nepali society-the agrarian household, the caste system, the joint family-are being hollowed out from within by the very people they depend on for their reproduction. The emergence of what respondents describe as a “young generation in transition”-neither fully belonging to the village nor fully at home in the city-captures this in-between condition sociologically: a liminal generation that inhabits multiple social worlds without being fully anchored in any of them.

7. Summary and Conclusion

This article has examined how international labour migration reshapes intergenerational relationships in rural Nepal through an in-depth qualitative study of Narethanti village in Baglung district. The central argument is that labour migration is not simply a livelihood strategy or an economic phenomenon but a profound social and cultural transformation that is fundamentally reorganizing the bonds, obligations, and value systems through which older and younger generations relate to one another. Drawing on life history interviews, a household survey, and key informant interviews with 45 respondents from 30 migrant households, the study has traced this transformation across four interconnected dimensions: the motivations driving young people to migrate; their growing economic independence from parental resources; their increasing social independence from caste- and clan-based hierarchies; and the deepening cultural disconnection between migrant youth and the older generation left behind in the village.

The study finds that young people’s decision to migrate is shaped not only by economic calculation but by a broader social disenchantment-a rejection of subsistence farming as an inadequate and undignified mode of life, and a dissatisfaction with the caste-based hierarchies that have historically determined social worth and opportunity in the village. Migration offers an escape from both, and in doing so, it reconfigures the intergenerational order that those systems have sustained. Young migrants return-or remain abroad-having accumulated economic resources that exceed their parents’ lifetime earnings, having absorbed values of individual merit and urban aspiration that sit uneasily alongside the collective obligations of agrarian village life, and having lost, gradually and sometimes irreversibly, their familiarity with the ritual, ceremonial, and social practices through which the older generation understands identity, belonging, and duty. The result is a widening gulf-not merely generational in the ordinary sense, but civilizational in its depth-between people who inhabit the same household but have been formed by radically different social worlds.

Three broader conclusions follow from these findings. *First*, labour migration in Nepal must be understood as a mechanism of social structural change, not merely

economic adjustment. It is reshaping the caste system, dissolving the agrarian basis of social identity, and undermining the joint family as an institution of care and social reproduction—changes that are likely to be irreversible and that will redefine rural Nepali society for generations. *Second*, the intergenerational dimension of migration is a critical and underexplored axis of social inequality. *Third*, the costs of migration are not shared evenly: elderly parents, in particular, bear the burden of spatial isolation, declining care, and the loss of cultural continuity that migration produces, while the young migrants who generate these disruptions often do so with the sincere belief that they are acting for the benefit of their families.

The tension between these two perspectives—neither of which is simply wrong—is one of the defining moral dilemmas of contemporary rural Nepal. Third, the condition of the “young generation in transition” documented in this study—caught between village and city, between tradition and modernity, belonging fully to neither world—suggests that migration produces not only economic remittances but what might be called cultural remittances: new values, aspirations, and social orientations that flow back from destination countries and transform the moral landscape of origin communities in ways that are difficult to predict or manage.

This article has focused on a single village studied in 2011, and its findings should be read in that context. Narethanti is not demographically unique among rural Nepali communities, but generalizations beyond the Western Hills region should be made with care. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capable of tracking the evolution of intergenerational relationships across multiple migration cycles, and from comparative studies across different ecological zones, caste compositions, and migration destinations. There is also a need for more scholarship on the perspectives of the elderly in migration-affected communities—voices that remain systematically marginal in a literature still largely organized around the migrant as protagonist. What is clear, however, is that the full social cost of Nepal’s labour migration regime cannot be measured in remittance flows alone. It must be measured, too, in the changing quality of relationships across generations—in the loneliness of parents whose children have moved to Bhairahawa or Doha, in the ritual knowledge that is no longer passed down, and in the slow dissolution of a moral world that took centuries to build.

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