

Research Paper XIII

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT *BHARIYAS* IN DARJEELING TOWN

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Introduction

A nationwide lockdown was imposed in India on 24 March 2020 for the first time in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A mere 21-day lockdown when it was first announced, turned out to last for several months. With factories and workplaces shut down, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future (Slater et al, 2020). Hundreds and thousands of them then began walking back home, due to the sudden closure of all the means of transport. Among the populace, migrants were found to be one of the most vulnerable groups during the lockdown since their very livelihood came to a complete standstill (Jesline et al, 2021). Quoting Samaddar (2018) and Jha and Kumar (2016), Maskara befittingly points out that even after 40 years of living in the city, the migrant remains an outsider and completely invisible yet indispensable for the city and faces insecurity and vulnerability on an everyday basis (Maskara, 2021: 53).

Because of this unforeseen announcement of the government, migrants suddenly found themselves unemployed with no source of income and a meagre savings in their hands. Prior to the pandemic, the majority of these labourers used to be out working, putting food on the table for their families. During the lockdown, as in the case of many of the white-collar employees, the 'work from home' solution was not a viable option for the migrant labourers. As a result, daily wage earners were among the ones who suffered the most.

Migrants were found to be the most vulnerable among the working class during this economic crisis (Nanda, 2020). Even though the lockdown affected the community at large and people were forced to stay at home, migrants could not even be in the comfort of being locked in with their families; instead, they were destined to be stuck in a migrant land with no means to survive (Kumar et al, 2020).¹ This community hence had to endure more appalling hardships than anyone else, not only financially but also socially and mentally (Aragona et al, 2020).

Losing their source of income on one hand and savings getting exhausted on the other, with little or no assistance from the government, migrants were thrown into a pool of abject uncertainty, vulnerability and precarity. During such difficult times, narratives such as 'Covid-19 will affect everyone in the same way' was widespread but it was not true for many of the marginalised and vulnerable in society. The stark reality of the gap between the rich and large sections of the labouring poor became clearly visible.

1 This however implies those migrants who did not migrate along with their own families.

This paper is an attempt to assess the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on one particular migrant group which labours in and around the Himalayan town of Darjeeling. These migrants are locally known as *bhariya*.² They earn a livelihood carrying goods in various towns around Darjeeling. The *bhariyas* who work in and around Darjeeling town are mostly migrants from neighbouring Nepal. Locals working as *bhariyas* are fewer in number compared to the migrants from Nepal. These *bhariyas* are seemingly insignificant, invisible and imperceptible section of the urban landscape, ever present but unnoticed. This paper aims to understand the pattern of their movement across the Nepal-India border, particularly between Nepal and Darjeeling town, focusing on whether the pandemic wrought any changes in their migration pattern. Along with the challenges faced by migrant *bhariyas*, this paper also aims to understand their coping mechanisms during the time of the pandemic and thereafter.

Though mere a few words would not do justice to the sufferings and struggles that they had to endure in time of such global crisis, this paper is just 'a part reflection' of the whole experience of those *bhariyas* and their families during the pandemic. It is an attempt to bring out the stories of those who are at the margin of the society, the group that barely makes it to the headlines and the ones who exist but hardly gets recognised, seen or heard like millions others.

Cross-border labour migration between Nepal and India

The practically uninhabited ridges of Dorje-ling began its rapid metamorphosis into a colonial hill station through infrastructural changes and environmental transformation of forests being cleared, new roads built, railways introduced, and the construction of administrative buildings and bungalows to meet colonial Britain's desires and requirements. These physical and structural transformation required labour far more than the local inhabitants (largely Lepcha and Limbu) could provide.

Middleton and Shneiderman (2018) point out that '...the British consequently lured workers from Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal, by promising wages, shelter and freedom from the oppressive tax and forced labour regime...(Middleton et al, 2018:6)'. If we have to look into the history of migration, we know that the first wave of labour migration from Nepal began in the 18th and 19th centuries when the Nepali state's oppressive land and labour policies forced peasants in the hills to

2 The other nomenclatures used for these *bhariya* are: *namley* and *kulli*, among others.

move out of their land and seek livelihoods elsewhere, both within Nepal and across the border in India (Regmi, 1978; Sharma, 2016; Chettri, 2017). British colonial rule triggered significant migration from Nepal to Darjeeling (Middleton et al, 7). Besides, to meet the significant labour needs of the budding tea industry, the British looked to neighbouring Sikkim, Bhutan and primarily Nepal for ‘coolies’³ (Middleton et al, 8). Colonial officials and planters lured labourers with promise of wages and housing as an alternative to the forced labour regimes, caste-based agrarian exploitation, and excessive taxation schemes in Nepal. Speaking about the migration from the then Gorkha state, Hutt (1998) highlights that Nepali peasants, the enslaved or landless, or over- taxed or indebted sought better prospects in ‘Muglan’ (meaning India, literally, land of Mughals).⁴ Going to Muglan would have been an enticing alternative to the oppressive hierarchies of 19th-century Nepal (Middleton et al, 9).

It is estimated that there are 5 to 7 million migrants from Nepal currently in India.⁵ They work as agricultural labourers, security guards, factory workers, construction workers, hotel cooks and helpers and also as casual workers in a multitude of sectors. Their migration remains undocumented because of the history the two countries shares and the high number of open border points between them. There are around 35 border crossing points between India and Nepal through which Nepali and Indians can cross without having to produce any papers.⁶

Today, a bulk of the migrant labourers from Nepal work in India’s informal sector which is considered one of the most vulnerable and precarious sectors. It is often said that the informal sector is located on a lower, more disadvantaged position (Loren, 1993). Informal economy is kept out of sight and control of the state and thus hardly gets any protection from the government. At present, the largest, most insecure and most crisis-ridden section of the working class are the unorganised workers with few or no labour laws to protect them. The informal economy comes with various uncertainties, insecurities and precariousness. Agarwala is of the view that informal workers represent one of the poorest and

3 The term ‘coolie’ is a colonial construct used to denote in Darjeeling labourers hired to carry loads, for construction of roads, work in tea plantations, etc. Some people in Darjeeling still refers to porters as coolies, or kulli.

4 Also see, Middleton and Shneiderman. (eds). 2018. p. 86.

5 C.K. Mandal, ‘Government indifferent towards plights of Nepali workers in India, labour migration experts,’ *The Kathmandu Post*, 28 January 2022. Retrieved from <https://tkpo.st/33Ifd0Q>.

6 Business Standard, ‘Nepal govt decides to close 22 entry points with India amid Covid-19 surge’, *Business Standard*, 1 May 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/nepal-govt-decides-to-close-22-entry-points-with-india-amid-covid-19-surge-121050100381_1.html.

most marginalised populations of the liberalisation era (Agarwala, 2008:376).

Importance of *bhariyas* in Darjeeling town

The use of humans to transport cargo dates back to the ancient world, prior to the domestication of animals and invention of wheels. But even today, after centuries of scientific revolution that produced pulleys, levers and wheels we see the human body still being used to bear load, carry the burden where modern forms of transportation cannot reach easily.

The written history of Darjeeling shows that on the steep Darjeeling streets, everyday conveyance of everything from people to goods depended on subaltern human bodies, in the virtual absence of wheeled and animal transport. European women and children, and sometimes men, rode in a type of sedan chair called a *dandee* (Middleton et al, 2018: 81). The *bhariyas* have been carrying humans as well as goods for a very long time and their importance is still felt in the everyday life of the people residing in and around the town. Due attention is needed be given to these group of labourers and the dependence of the locals on them cannot be neglected.

Over the time, this practice of carrying humans on a *dandee* has diminished to a very great extent but it still exists in places where modern form of mechanical conveyance is rare or impractical. The use of *bhariyas* to carry goods can still be found in parts of some mountainous terrain; places that have non-motorable roads or in places relatively difficult for the vehicles to reach. Darjeeling town, though being well connected with roadways and railway, has places inside the urban space where vehicles cannot reach easily. In such cases, the *bhariyas* are the only option for the majority of locals as well as the tourists to transport goods from one place to another.

I would also like to specifically point out here that I am not referring to the high-altitude mountaineering porters also known as Sherpas, regardless of their ethnicity.⁷ The focus of his paper are only the *bhariyas* who labour inside the urban landscape of the Himalayan town of Darjeeling.

7 See Sarkar (2016 & 2017). It has been elaborately discussed in her writings on the very issue that I am trying to bring in here. She argues that *Sherpas* are always equated with 'porter' or 'coolies' of the Himalayan region, however this identity is not enough to understand '*sherpas*' as a whole.

Area of study

Darjeeling is one of the districts in the Indian state of West Bengal. It lies in the Lesser Himalaya at an elevation of 2000 metres (6560 ft). The total population of the district was 1.85 million, according to the 2011 census. There are a total of 27 towns/cities in Darjeeling district. Of these towns, I have chosen one, i.e., Darjeeling town, for the present study. The reason for choosing this particular town is because it is one of the largest towns and the majority of the *bharyas* here have migrated from Nepal and are employed in the portering of goods here. Unfortunately, there is no official data on the total number of migrants working in the whole district.

Methodology and data collection

For this study, data was collected through both primary and secondary sources. For the primary data, field work was conducted in Darjeeling town during the month of December 2021 and February–March 2022. Four work stations were taken into consideration for the study: i) Darjeeling Railway Station, ii) Bhanu Bhawan, Chowrasta, ii) Sabji Line or Beech Galli (main market area), and iv) Judge Bazaar. Face-to-face interviews with the *bharyas* were conducted at their work stations and also where they lived. A total of 42 in-depth interviews and four focus groups were conducted. An open-ended interview schedule was prepared prior going to the field. Video and voice recording were taken with prior consent of the respondents.

Background of *bharyiya* migration

It is true that mobility provides new opportunities to escape from the social and economic vulnerabilities back home and to support those who have been left behind. However, it also exposes migrants to innumerable vulnerabilities via exploitative working conditions, exposure to health risks, etc. *Bharyyas* are a huge section of working class for whom there is almost no safety provision, no job security, and no social security.

Migration from Nepal to India has a very old history as it has already been discussed in brief above. The Nepal-India Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) needs special mention here as this treaty allows for free movement of people and goods between these two countries. The open and porous borders between Nepal and India have facilitated mobility, making movement easier. No work permit is

required to cross the border and above all it is because of the inexpensive travel cost compared to other countries.

There is a lot of literature highlighting the history of migration from Nepal to India and particularly to Darjeeling (Chettri, 2017; Middleton et al, 2018; Sharma, 2018, to name a few). Equally, however, there is a dearth that specifically talks about the history of *bhariya* migration from Nepal to Darjeeling. Shneiderman (2015) has talked about experiences of migration of the Thangmi in a few chapters. But since the book does not deal entirely with the migration of *bhariyas* from Nepal to Darjeeling, it does not delve fully into the issue. However, it sheds some light on it and provides some missing pieces I was trying to figure out while seeking answers to many of the questions that I had in mind while I started looking into their migration. Since my area of focus is the migration of *bhariya* community and there are many Thangmi (or Thami)⁸ *bhariyas* in Darjeeling town, Shneiderman's work helped me in looking at the migration pattern of only one community in particular.

Due to this dearth of literature on the said area of research, it is challenging to find the exact timeline of the start of their migration unlike the migration of tea labourers in Darjeeling, which has been the focus of many studies (Bhowmik, 1981, 2021; Khawas, 2006; Rai, 2017 etc). Looking at the Thangmi migration, Shneiderman (2015) points out that '...the 1872 Census of India lists 13 Thangmi speakers in Darjeeling, a number that had risen to 319 by 1901...' (Shneiderman, 2015: 114), which at least gives us an idea about the migration of Thangmi but it is not clear whether they worked as *bhariyas* or not. She again points out that the data is an under-representation of the real numbers of Thangmi.

Table 1: Gender of respondents

Indicator	Number	Percentage of total
Male	22	52
Female	20	48
TOTAL	42	100

It is estimated that more than 90 per cent of the *bhariyas* are migrants from Nepal in Darjeeling town.⁹ There is a gradual flow of labourers from Nepal employed

8 'Thangmi' is the ethnonym in the Thangmi language. The Nepali and Indian states as well as non-Thangmi usually use the term 'Thami' (Also see Shneiderman, 2015).

9 Vivek Chettri, 'Nepal porters leave, hill life hit', *The Telegraph*, 5 May 2015.

in the informal sector of Darjeeling's urban spaces. Tables 1 and 2 give a brief description of the demographic profile of the *bhariyas* interviewed for this study.

Table 2: Place of origin of respondents

Indicators	Number	Percentage of total
<i>Dolakha district</i>		
Babare	10	24
Kalinchok	8	19
Alampu	8	19
Charikot	7	17
Bigu	2	5
Gaurishankar	2	5
Lapilang	1	2
Sundrawati	2	5
<i>Jhapa district</i>		
Charali	1	2
Pachabari	1	2
TOTAL	42	100

Table 3 presents the caste/ethnicity of the respondents. More than three quarters belong to the Thangmi ethnic group. Looking at the history of Thangmi migration, Shneiderman (2015) points out that the Thangmis who migrated from Nepal to Darjeeling before 1950 highlighted different motivations for migration but they shared a desire to leave behind the land shortage, debt, and social exclusion of rural Nepal. The *bhariyas* I interviewed said that debt and unemployment were the major factors for their migration.

Table 3: Caste/ethnicity of the *bhariyas*

Indicator	Number	Percentage of total
Thami	33	79
Chhetri	3	7
Tamang	2	5
Bahun	2	5
Others	2	5
TOTAL	42	100

Looking at the demographic profiles of the respondents, all except two of the *bhariyas* were married. One female *bhariya* was a widow and the other had separated from her husband.

Economic factors were generally regarded one of the most crucial push factor for the migration of these *bhariyas*. Indebtedness in rural life painted a very grim picture. Debt from loan sharks is seen was one of the main reasons that forced many *bhariyas* to choose the path of migration to Darjeeling. T. Thami (F, 32), mother of three daughters, had to migrate to pay the debt of NPR 1 to 1.2 million (ca. USD 10,000). After working for three years she was able to clear off some debt but she still had NPR 400,000 to 500,000 remaining. Her parents, too, worked in Darjeeling town for two and a half years to pay off their own debt. The Maoist insurgency was also pointed out to be the reason for the migration of some families. D. Sharma (F, 48) had to migrate to Darjeeling because of the terror of the Maoist insurgency in her village. She said: 'I was alone at home with my young children. My husband had migrated to Darjeeling. The Maoists used to come in the village and would seek refuge for the night. The villagers had to oblige them without a word. They used to take people from their homes. They used to destroy the harvest and the villagers had to feed them.'

According to her, the villagers could not refuse them because of the fear the Maoists had created. She along with her children left the village when she was 25 years old.

A significant pull factor for the *bhariyas* and their families was the better education system in Darjeeling. Historically, too, education has been far more accessible in Darjeeling than in Nepal (Shneiderman, 2015: 91-92). The *bhariyas* emphasised providing better education to their children so that their children would not have to labour on the streets as they do.

Social networks have played a very important role in the migration process of the *bhariyas*. It is through these networks that migrants learn about opportunities and conditions in potential destinations. The majority of the *bhariyas* in the study have migrated along with some family members, village neighbours, friends, etc. M. Chettri's (F, 39) father used to work in Darjeeling as a *bhariya* when she was very young. Later, she migrated to Darjeeling along with her husband, who was also working in Darjeeling before they were married. S. Thami's (F, 38) husband, father and father-in-law had worked in Darjeeling as *bhariyas* before she started the work. It is through these networks they planned to move to Darjeeling in search of a livelihood.

Table 4 shows the total number of years the respondents had worked carrying people's loads and their association with the work of portage in Darjeeling town.

Of them three had been working as *bhariyas* for more than 41 years while most (15 or 36 per cent) for less than five years. It was also clear from the interviews that most of them are seasonal migrants who have been crossing the border once or twice a year to come and work in Darjeeling. A few of them had also worked in various other towns of Darjeeling district before coming to Darjeeling town.

Table 4: Year(s) working in Darjeeling town

Indicator	Number	Percentage of total
Less than 5 years	15	36
6-10 years	7	17
11-20 years	6	14
21-30 years	6	14
31-40 years	5	12
41 years and above	3	7
TOTAL	42	100

Since the informal sector is filled with uncertainty, the *bhariyas* are not sure for how long they would be able to work in Darjeeling. One thing that was certain was the fact that they do not want their children to be engaged in the work they are doing.

Types of migrants

Bhariyas were involved in two types of migration : i). seasonal, or short-term, migration, and ii) long-term migration. Seasonal migrants usually work for around six months, and return during the Nepali calendar month of *Asar* (June-July)¹⁰ to catch the paddy planting season. This category of *bhariyas* rarely move with their families. In contrast, the long-term migrants usually migrate along with their family members. They do not visit Nepal at regular intervals. They do so only in times of family emergencies such as death or marriage ceremonies in the family and of close relatives. A few of the long-term migrants have also bought land and built a house in Darjeeling.

10 It is the third month in the Bikram Samvat, Nepali calendar. This month coincides with June 15 to July 16 of the western calendar.

Covid-19 and its challenges

Migrant labourers faced multiple hardships during the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with economic and social difficulties they underwent a humanitarian crisis as well. Once the lockdown was announced, life went into a complete standstill. It took quite a few days and even weeks to process all that was going around. The section here, therefore, is an attempt to understand the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and the experiences of the *bhariyas*. It will highlight the challenges the *bhariyas* had to face due to the unprecedented lockdown announced in March 2020.

All the *bhariyas* interviewed were working in Darjeeling town when the nationwide lockdown was announced. Unlike other migrants who travelled on foot to reach their homes during the lockdown, the *bhariyas* did not go back to Nepal because of the ban on transport facilities and the closure of the India-Nepal border. Of the 35 border points with India, the Nepal government had decided to close 22 border points. The two border check points of Kakarbhitta and Pashupatinagar that Nepali migrants travel through to come to Darjeeling were also closed. Thus, movement between the two countries was restricted.

The *bhariyas* were hopeful that the lockdown would be lifted soon. Some said that it was not possible for them to walk back to their homes in Nepal as the borders were closed. It was not possible for them to walk back to Nepal mainly for two other reasons as well. First, the distance between the two places as the distance between Darjeeling and Dolakha is approximately 535 kilometres. Second, because of safety concerns as the chances of being contaminated by the virus during the pandemic were high.

Once the lockdown was announced, the *bhariyas* panicked about how they could put food to the table for their families. Another major challenge the *bhariyas* had to face was the payment of the monthly rent. There was a slight ray of hope that the lockdown would end at the earliest but that was not to happen. Months and months went by, and the lockdown remained in place as the number of infections was rising every day. They grew anxious with each passing day. Most of the *bhariyas* I interviewed had migrated along with their families to Darjeeling. In many cases both the husband and wife were working as *bhariyas*. Some of the wives also worked as helper in wealthier households. They felt helpless as there was no stable source of income during the lockdown.

It is impossible for people in the slums of India to practice the WHO guidelines of social distancing to check the spread of Covid-19 (Deka et al, 2020). The settlements or wards of Darjeeling town are also overcrowded and packed. Due to the nature of their work, *bhariyas* need to live in the town area which is usually

congested. They live with their families or friends in rented rooms consisting generally of one bedroom and a kitchen. Some do not even have a separate kitchen. There are no separate lavatories for each family living in the same house. They usually share a common toilet-cum-bathroom.

S. Thami (F, 38) lives on the ground floor of a hotel near the horse stable in Chowratsa with her husband and three daughters. The couple work as a *bharyas*. There is a small passage of stairs going down the building but so narrow that only one person could fit into it. It was so dark that I could hardly figure out how many storeys the building actually was. There were many tiny rooms along the way, down the building. I could not count the rooms because it was dark, and I had to look hard for the stairs to place my feet. The family lives in one bedroom which had two beds and barely any space to stand or move. There is only one toilet and no separate bathroom. There are other *bharyas* families like hers who share similar space with their own families. Some share such living space with their friends. It was tough to follow physical distancing protocol as they were living in cramped spaces and were using a common toilet with no running water facilities during the pandemic.

The first lockdown brought with it a complete closure of transport, schools, shopping malls, local markets, etc, and that directly affected the *bharyas* working in Darjeeling town. The busy roads of the town became silent all of a sudden. There was no work available for them. Even though there were some relaxations during the second lockdown that started from middle of May 2021, there were less work for them because of the ban on the entry of both national and international tourists. Such protocols of the government did not favour the *bharyas* as they earn by carrying the luggage of tourists as well.

Grocery and vegetable shops were open while maintaining strict Covid-19 protocols during the lockdown. Some *bharyas* like M. Chettri (F, 39), R. Thami (F, 46) and N. Thami (F, 35) who used to work for a particular shopkeeper at Beech Galli, Sabji Line and Judge Bazaar, used to get phone calls from the owner of the shop if there were loads to be carried. If they did not receive calls, then they had to spend their days inside their rooms. Prior to the lockdown, there was already no certainty of work. Covid-19 pandemic proved to be even worse for them.

Another married couple, H. Thami (M, 55) and B. Thami (F, 48), have been working as *bharyas* for 35 and 30 years, respectively. They are from Charikot in Dolakha. The couple were going through a rough phase and the lockdown further added to their misery. H. Thami met with an accident a year before the pandemic. He had been carrying two gas cylinders when he lost his balance and fell. He fractured his right leg and hand after which he was told by the doctor to take bed rest for six months or more. The sole responsibility of three children and an injured

and bedridden husband fell on the shoulders of B. Thami. There were days when she slept without any food.

During the lockdown, A.K. Thami (M, 52) borrowed from people to survive as there was hardly any work. He is still trying to clear off those debts. He recalls it to be one of the toughest times he had experienced in his entire life. He dreads the idea of another lockdown.

Among the respondents there was only one *bhariya*, M.B. Thami (M, 52) who was lucky to receive a permit from the police station (*thana*) to cross the border. There were 36 *bhariyas* who crossed the border along with him. They reserved three vehicles from Darjeeling up to the Pashupatinagar border crossing. Each had to pay INR 1200 (ca. USD 15) for the ride. Once they reached the checkpoint, they boarded a bus that was already there to receive them. All 36 of them stayed at a quarantine centre for 18 days once they crossed into Nepal. After the quarantine period was over all went home and got to meet their families. Apart from the vehicle fare from Darjeeling to Pashupatinagar border checkpoint they did not have to pay for anything. The bus and the quarantine facilities were provided by the Nepali government.

Not everyone had the same luck. T. Thami (M, 46) was in Darjeeling town when the lockdown was announced and he had to stay back. His family was in Nepal and he used to stay with few *bhariya* friends in a rented room. He could not travel home. It was tough as there was no work. He could not buy food. He was eating meals on credit. For almost a year he had his meals on credit. He is still working to clear off that debt. On top of that, he has to save money as well to send back home to the family.

Apart from these problems, the *bhariyas* also had to meet the educational needs of their children. Due to the closure of schools the children had to attend their lessons online. Getting the phone recharged was another headache for them.

S. Thami (F, 34) could not take her son to see the doctor because she could not afford to do so. Her son has to be taken to the city of Siliguri for a check-up every six months.

Every day brings new challenges for the *bhariyas*. Even today, they panic over the fact that they might have to stay home if another lockdown is announced.

Relief during the time of crisis

Bhariyas are daily wage-earners and so do not have a fixed daily income. Each day comes with a new challenge. Their daily income ranges around INR 100-400 on

average but sometimes it is a struggle to even earn INR 50 in a day. Whatever they earn, it gets spent on that day's food. So, when they lost their jobs due to the pandemic they had to manage with whatever bare minimum savings they had. They received some aid from their neighbours and from relatives who were also working in Darjeeling. The government did not provide any support to them. The *bharyas* did not receive any kind of subsidised ration from the government like the locals did.

Throughout the country one could see the plights of migrant labourers with the loss of jobs and lack of food or accommodation. Many had to rely on informal sources for money or charity from civil society (Maskara, 2021: 57). Like all helpless migrants, the *bharyas* also received support from the local NGOs or associations. They were provided with rations, vegetables, clothes and blankets, etc. B. Thami was provided with 50 kilograms of rice by a neighbour and another 30 kilograms of rice by another neighbour. Similarly, S. Thami received blankets from a local NGO.

S. Thami's friends and neighbours also helped her during the emergency. Hayden Hall, a private non-profit organisation, provided them with vegetables, dal, etc. Two other individuals also helped her with relief.

Though such relief was not given on a regular basis, it did provide some succour at the time of severe crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the strength of the society as a whole as individuals and organisations came forward to help those in need in time of such difficulties. That is one positive aspect of this pandemic.

The pandemic and the plight of women *bharyas*

India's informal sector is among the largest among developing and emerging economies. It is estimated that informal workers make up nearly 90 per cent of India's labour force, and among women who work, more than 90 per cent do so in the informal economy (Bonnet et al 2019). Women earn less than men on average, and have inadequate access to markets, formal sources of credit, and limited bargaining power to improve their working conditions and earnings (Kingra et al, 2021:1). The pandemic and successive lockdowns particularly worsened the working conditions of women in the informal economy. With no support for childcare and limited social protection, women who worked in the informal economy bore a disproportionate burden during the pandemic (Ibid, 2). Most women working in the informal sector indicated that they had encountered challenges that affected their livelihoods and work, at least in the initial months of the lockdown (Ibid, 4).

Although women *bharyas* had to bear the brunt of the pandemic like their

male counterparts, the burden of household and childcare fell on their shoulders. Before the pandemic they were able to earn some money which provided them a sense of economic independence. Though they had to face hardships before the lockdown they used to be 'at work', which would give them some time to be away from household chores and contribute to the running of the household.

The Covid-19 pandemic snatched away this freedom from these working women. The sole responsibility of childcare fell upon them. Before the pandemic, the women used to avail of the facility of a crèche at Hayden Hall.¹¹ The crèche facility was also closed because of the pandemic for over two years. Now, the kids are used to being with their mother and because of that many women are not being able to re-join work even after the lockdown has been lifted. The day-care centre recently started functioning from February 2022. I met many *bhariya* mothers at the day-care centre who labour during the day and come to pick up their child in the evening. There were also mothers like H. Thami (29) and T. Thami (34), who were waiting for their children to turn a year old so that they can place their child at the crèche and start working.

Changes after Covid-19 pandemic

One cannot easily fathom the social and economic disruption the pandemic has caused. The pandemic and the long months of lockdowns brought several changes in the lives of people all around the world. Some of these included *bhariyas* now having to use masks while at work as a means of protection from getting infected. However, they complained about the uneasiness that caused while working on the streets. They complained about the difficulty in breathing while carrying loads as they have to walk on the hilly terrain of Darjeeling town, which their mouths covered by mask. During my field work in the month of March 2022 I could see that the majority of the *bhariyas* had entirely stopped using masks. The number of *bhariyas* using masks was a bit higher during December 2021. Eventually, they are giving up the idea of wearing a mask because of the inconvenience it caused while working.

Though none of the respondents (except one) had travelled to Nepal during the lockdown some of them visited their families back home once the lockdown was lifted. They had to be more cautious while travelling which was not the case before

11 Hayden Hall is a private, non-profit making organisation in Darjeeling, working towards the development of underprivileged women in the areas and help them become self-reliant.

the pandemic. There were strict checks at the India-Nepal border and they had to face several minor inconveniences.

One major change was seen in the mode of travelling. Most of them have started hiring a rented vehicle directly from Darjeeling town to Dolakha in Nepal with eight to 10 sharing one vehicle. Usually, they plan a date for the journey and book the vehicle in advance. In that way, they save their time and the journey is hassle free. Earlier they had to change four or five vehicles to reach their destination. But this also added to the cost of travel. Whereas a one-way fare would cost them INR 2000-2500 (ca. USD 25-30), now it was INR 3500-4000 for one way travel.

Another important change is in the flow of migrants. A Thami (M, 45) said that because of the pandemic Darjeeling town is crowded with more *bhariyas* than it was before. Those already working there now face tough competition. The number of *bhariyas* has increased because of the pandemic as international labour migration (to countries other than India) from Nepal came to a stop for a very long time. He added that young men would have flown to other foreign country (*bidesh*) if they could get their work visa. But since India shares an open border with Nepal and there is no work permit required to work in India most of the men are working in Darjeeling for the 'time being'. If they are allowed to 'go to that side (*uta*)' then there would be fewer *bhariyas* in Darjeeling. K. Thami, A. Thami and M. Thami had worked previously in Malaysia for two to three years. Many young men like K. Thami (M, 27) and M. Thami (M, 24) have applied for work visas for places as far afield as Romania but because of the pandemic they have not got their visas yet. It is to be noted here that it is only the men who have applied for these work visas in third countries and not the women.

Conclusion

While migrants constitute a large percentage of the Indian workforce, they remain insignificant in policies and invisible in the national imagination (Mittal et al, 2021:40). The *bhariyas* are no different in this regard. Many of them have come to labour in Darjeeling town to earn to repay their debts in Nepal. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic their debts have not gone down. To keep their households running they took loans from informal sources like friends, relatives, neighbours, local shops, etc. As a result, some of them are now under another burden of debt.

Though the Nepal-India border has been reopened, there is still a fear of another lockdown as the cases of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus was on the rise in India at the time of the field work. A January 2022 news report mentioned

that India had 2.2 million active cases and a daily positivity rate of 16.2 per cent.¹² Migrants are afraid of going through the ordeal all over once again if another lockdown is announced.

Nepali migrants faced considerable challenges during the lockdown in India. Though many returned to Nepal from India but there is still a dearth of data on the scale of this movement. Having lost their source of income, it became difficult for some to survive in India without a job.¹³ In the aftermath of the pandemic there has been an influx of migrants since there was a continuing ban on some international migration from Nepal. A few of the *bharyas* (mostly young men) are waiting for the approval of their work visas for Southeast Asian and European countries. For now, migrating to these countries seems a distant dream for many of them. Till that hope gets fulfilled they will continue working as *bharyas* in Darjeeling.

During the lockdown the *bharyas* were worried over how they would meet the basic necessities of their lives like food, clothing, accommodation and education of their children. The question of 'when will it end?' always loomed in their minds. Along with these uncertainties, there was the fear of getting infected with the virus as they were living in confined spaces with their families. They had to face economic hardships coupled with food insecurity.

Precautions regarding Covid-19 were rarely followed by the *bharyas*. They have to wait for their customers at their work stations, carry loads on the usually crowded and busy roads. Maintaining hygiene at home and even at work was not followed religiously. Even though they started working once the lockdown was lifted, proper physical distancing could not be maintained. Use of mask was rare because of the inconvenience it caused while working.

Shneiderman (2015) says that the '...contemporary routes of migration from Nepal to Indian city centres, the Middle East, the United States, and beyond have received significant academic attention but the causes and effects of these more recent routes of migration can be better understood in relation to the long history of trans-Himalayan migration between Nepal and adjoining border regions...' (Shneiderman, 2015:104). Migrants working in India especially in small towns like Darjeeling have remained in the shadow of migration studies. Arguing along

12 The Indian Express, 'Coronavirus Omicron India Highlights: Immune Response Induced by Omicron Effectively Neutralise Delta Variant, Reveals Study, *The Indian Express*, 26 January 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-omicron-india-live-news-third-wave-health-ministry-covid-delhi-mumbai-7740153/>.

13 M. Budhair, 'Workers return home after losing jobs in India', *The Kathmandu Post*, 18 January 2022. <https://kathmandupost.com/sudurpaschim-province/2022/01/16/workers-return-home-after-losing-jobs-in-india>.

that very ground, Shneiderman (2015) highlights that the scholarship seeking to understand the full complexity of contemporary 'transnational social spaces' (Pries 2001) must look beyond the global cities that serve as the focal point for the literature on transnationalism, and explore the full range of geographical and social scales on which such spaces may be embedded whether villages, towns, and regional centres, and historicise contemporary formations in relation to long-term patterns of mobility (Ibid, 105).

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The Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility is a research centre within Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, established with the primary objective of contributing to broader theories and understandings on labour and mobility. It conducts interdisciplinary, policy-relevant research on critical issues affecting workers to provide new insights on the impact of labour and migration; functions as a forum to foster academic, policy and public debates; and serves as a clearinghouse on various resources related to labour and migration in and from Nepal.

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