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The divide within

Invisibility of labourers in Kathmandu is compounded by their inability to negotiate with employers directly

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The Madhesi migrant population in Kathmandu, heterogeneous as it is, remains outside the public fabric and does not participate in religious, communal or political events

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As the conflict over Madhesi inclusion in the new constitution is entering its second phase, it is worth taking a fresh look at the country's regional divisions. We are used to hearing about 'the Madhes issue' in terms of regional discrimination (lack of public investment in infrastructure, education, health) and of the 'Kathmandu-centric' policies of the political elite. Though Nepal's caste- and class landscapes are (almost) infinitely complex, the public image of societal polarisations are often analysed geographically: the West is poorer than the East, the terraced hill agriculture is underdeveloped vis-à-vis the urban economy, and the southern plains exert an increasing demographic pressure on a fragile state-formation project. Nepal's complicated geography and centuries of divide-and-rule no doubt warrant such claims; yet they also risk blinding us to the schisms that run right under our noses within the socio-economic fabric of Kathmandu's enduring inequalities.

During the past five months, I have been investigating the situation of migrant labourers in the city and particularly those who work at the bottom of the construction industry as helpers carrying loads, or skilled and semi-skilled masons who are slightly better off yet endure very similar work and living conditions. The first thing to note about this population is that they are mostly from the Tarai, in particular the districts of Parsa, Bara, Rautahat,

and mainly male, although there is a great deal of variety across the Valley and within subsections of the industry owing to different histories and needs of the industry. There is a long history of skilled floor-layers, marble-cutters, plumbers and 'patti' designers from Bihar and Kolkata, but these form a minority group compared to those from the Tarai, even though they are often conflated in the untrained eyes of the hill populations.

Secondly, construction labourers as a group are invisible in multiple ways. In terms of employment, their contracts are entirely informal, the conditions of their labour subject to endless negotiations, their only 'bargaining power' the ability to decline work, which is a very short-lived strategy. Consequently, labourers spend a good amount of time waiting for work, which arrives at the employer's discretion, and even upon completion, a new cycle of non-enumerated 'work' takes place as they chase their unpaid wages from reluctant employers, or their middlemen.

Nobody knows

Labourers' invisibility is doubled by their inability to negotiate with employers directly: "The sahu," one 28-year old mason dishearteningly told me after he had been working in his house for over a week, "we never talk to him." Try to ask the relevant governmental offices—Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Urban Development, Department of Urban Development and Building Construction—how many labourers are working in the construction sector? Or the many smaller and larger organisations, starting with the International Labour Organisation, that are engaged in the sector; or the unions for construction workers of which all the major parties have a special section; or the construction companies that are actually hiring them—nobody knows. Even my neighbour, who is in the process of building a three-storey house to be converted into a lucrative condominium, does not keep count of the number of workers he is employing, as it takes place through several middlemen.

The crucial distinction between Indian and Tarai affiliations are thus not 'seen' by Kathmandu's employers who tend to treat all their low-level employees as foreigners to the city's public culture. This blindness is aggravated by the structural complicity of municipal and state authorities. There is an enormous layer of the urban population whose working life remains below the radar of formal state and non-state institutions involved in the economy. Unsurprisingly, this is where most transgressions occur and where labour exploitation is at its clearest. In addition to the insecurity of wages, there are daily occurrences of discrimination, degrading work conditions and threats to lives and limbs. One local union leader recounted an incident where a house owner had locked up a labourer in the bathroom as punishment for using it, although he had been provided with no other toilet facility. The worker was only let out after a union-led mob threatened to storm the owner's premises. The informal economy thrives on the strategic blindness of the state bureaucracy, which allows certain classes to prey upon unprotected workers with immunity.

The situation is exacerbated by the invisibility of the private and social lives of the migrant labourers. The Madhesi migrant population in Kathmandu, heterogeneous as it is, remains outside the public fabric and does not participate in religious, communal or political events. Their isolation is partly due to their precarious working conditions, which make it difficult for them to bring their families along, and partly due to the unwelcoming environment they encounter in Kathmandu.

When not working, they are visible chiefly as conspicuous groups loitering around select street corners before and after work, though these areas are actually where they provide the city with the free service of a job exchange. Despite the variety of migrant groups from the Tarai that end up working in Kathmandu's construction sector, there is a surprising agreement among labourers that they feel alienated in the Capital either for linguistic, cultural or economic reasons. Caste is never given as an explanation and neither is class, though many can tell stories of racist jokes against 'black Indian' workers. But the politics of caste and class work in intricate ways, and combined with pressures of poverty, crammed living spaces, experiences of inferiority and a lack of public spaces that can accommodate them, it has pushed their existence out of public sight.

Possible lesson from Europe

This invisibility should be understood in conjunction with the general marginality of workers in the informal economy, which makes Madhesi migrant labourers doubly exposed to the dividing forces of Nepal's political economy. As citizens, Madhesi labourers are unable to lay claim to basic social services and they lack political representation in the city to help them overcome marginalisation. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the city, with its overlapping historical forms of ethnic and economic dominance, has in fact rendered the southern migrant groups invisible since an acknowledgment of the factual heterogeneity of the city might result in a crisis of governance in the very centre of dominance. The Central Bureau of Statistics is colluding in this narrative of the hill-dominated capital in its Nepal Living Standard Surveys, as it stubbornly only counts house owners and de-facto, and neatly, excludes all the mobile groups from enumeration.


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The general picture of a conflict between rural and urban Nepal is thus in need of an updated analysis that takes into account variegated transformations of space following in particular from uneven expansions of the Capital that are heightening and relocating ethnic and rural divisions. One way to address these challenges, as was done successfully during European periods of urbanisation after World War II, would involve offering cheap public housing in exchange for migrants' participation in building the city and to ensure basic rights that address migrant labourers' work as well as private lives.

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