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Caste and labour migration

Nepal Labour Migration Report 2024's silence on caste reinforces the myth that migration is casteless.



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Post Illustration

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The government of Nepal recently released its [Labour Migration Report, 2024](https://moless.gov.np/content/13312/nepal-labor-migration-report-2024/) (<https://moless.gov.np/content/13312/nepal-labor-migration-report-2024/>). The objective of the report was to provide a comprehensive overview of labour migration from Nepal. In the words of the Secretary for Labour, Employment and Social Security, the report provides “a clear and honest look at the state of Nepali labour migration for the fiscal years 2022/23 and 2023/24.”

This report offers disaggregated data on where Nepali citizens migrate to (destination countries) and where they migrate from (districts and provinces), as well as their gender, age and skill profiles. It also covers Nepali migrant workers' health and safety conditions, recruitment processes, access to justice, reintegration of returnee migrants and skill training aspects. It even provides information about foreign workers employed in Nepal. It highlights institutions, policies and laws and frameworks responsible for protecting the rights of Nepali citizens abroad, ensuring that their labour migration is safe and dignified.

Yet, [caste](https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/01/22/labour-migration-gender-and-caste) (<https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/01/22/labour-migration-gender-and-caste>), which influences the safety, dignity and working conditions of Nepali citizens whether at home or abroad, is never discussed in the report. This omission is not a mere oversight. Rather, it is a political choice. By ignoring the caste of Nepali labour migrants, authors of the report signal that caste identity has no bearing on migration in Nepal. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Caste has always shaped labour and migration in Nepali society. From the historical *varna* system to its legal codification in the Muluki Ain, caste has [structured](https://samatafoundation.org/product/verna-system-and-class-struggle-in-nepal/) (<https://samatafoundation.org/product/verna-system-and-class-struggle-in-nepal/>) labour relations, economic opportunities and social hierarchies.

Whilst caste discrimination has been abolished in Nepal, the legacy of [caste-based hierarchy](https://www.routledge.com/Political-Transformations-in-Nepal-Dalit-Inequality-and-Social-Justice/Bishwakarma/p/book/9780367660666) (<https://www.routledge.com/Political-Transformations-in-Nepal-Dalit-Inequality-and-Social-Justice/Bishwakarma/p/book/9780367660666>) still strongly reverberates [across](https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.globe.v6i0.2327) (<https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.globe.v6i0.2327>) and [beyond Nepal](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1468796819890138) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1468796819890138>). It is [evident](https://www.jstor.org/stable/48643574?seq=1) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48643574?seq=1>) in the everyday oppression, untouchability and exploitation still experienced by Dalits. It is also reflected in the stereotyping of indigenous communities as [alcohol drinkers or less intelligent](https://www.himalkhabar.com/news/143929) (<https://www.himalkhabar.com/news/143929>), which normalises microaggressions, stigmatisation and abuse in the society. This can be seen in the difficulties the state faces in reintegrating Nepali citizens freed from the Kamaiya/Kalamari, Haliya and Harwa-Charwa systems. Caste-based [discrimination](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/sep/11/nepal-celebrated-dalit-activist-on-her-lifelong-battle-for-equality) (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/sep/11/nepal-celebrated-dalit-activist-on-her-lifelong-battle-for-equality>) continues to occur in housing, health, [employment](https://tijer.org/tijer/papers/TIJER2303033.pdf) (<https://tijer.org/tijer/papers/TIJER2303033.pdf>) and [political representation](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2057891116660633) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2057891116660633>).

Restrictions on land ownership, education and, most importantly, labour have historically pushed millions of Nepali citizens into cycles of poverty. Poverty has often been identified as the ['root cause' of migration](https://nepjol.info/index.php/tgb/article/view/43488) (<https://nepjol.info/index.php/tgb/article/view/43488>) among migrationists of Nepal. Yet, migration is deeply intertwined with [centuries of social hierarchy and persistent oppression](https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/forskning/aktuelt/arrangementer/disputaser/2025/thesis-abstract_ankita-shrestha.pdf) (https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/forskning/aktuelt/arrangementer/disputaser/2025/thesis-abstract_ankita-shrestha.pdf) and has never been caste-neutral.

Whilst historically caste dictated who could migrate and where, today labour migration also offers a means to challenge caste hierarchies and ongoing caste-based oppression in Nepal.

Several scholars have emphasised the significance of caste in migration. For example, Ramesh Sunam, through [ethnographic research](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2014.948393) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2014.948393>), demonstrates how international labour migration alters migrants' economic and social space in their places of origin. He also highlights how Dalit citizens use financial, human and symbolic capital accumulated abroad to contest casteist institutions. Likewise, Mitra Pariyar explores caste-based discrimination within [Nepali diasporas](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19438192.2018.1523091) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19438192.2018.1523091>), illustrating that migration does not erase hierarchical social structures. Mihwa Wi shows how labour migration reduces [dependency](https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/37170/MWi_moodledata_temp_turnitintool_1492033496_935_1478680931_3695.pdf) (https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/37170/MWi_moodledata_temp_turnitintool_1492033496_935_1478680931_3695.pdf) on upper-caste elites in Nepal. Sita Mademba highlights how the Nepali anti-trafficking industry [reinforces](https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/37170/MWi_moodledata_temp_turnitintool_1492033496_935_1478680931_3695.pdf) (https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/37170/MWi_moodledata_temp_turnitintool_1492033496_935_1478680931_3695.pdf) caste-based oppression in Nepal by restricting the migration of poor indigenous, Dalit and so-called lower-caste women. Moreover, [Krishna P Adhikari and David N Gellner have recently started to discuss how international migration transforms inter-caste relations](https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8da0f2bd-c8ee-482e-8f85-e5950fead247) (<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8da0f2bd-c8ee-482e-8f85-e5950fead247>) in Nepal.

Whilst there is a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of [caste in the labour migration](https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/01/22/labour-migration-gender-and-caste) (<https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/01/22/labour-migration-gender-and-caste>) process, the authors of the latest [Labour Migration Report](https://giwmcsdnone.gov.np/media/pdf_upload/Nepal%2520Labour%2520Migration%2520Report%25202024%2520Final%2520_11%2520.pdf) (https://giwmcsdnone.gov.np/media/pdf_upload/Nepal%2520Labour%2520Migration%2520Report%25202024%2520Final%2520_11%2520.pdf) make no mention of 'caste' anywhere in the report.

However, if we take a closer look at the report, particularly its bibliography, we see that upper-caste researchers were present throughout. For example, if we remove white, western, and non-Nepali authors cited in the report, we observe that almost 80 percent of them were elite upper-caste, who constitute nearly one-third of Nepal's population. This percentage relies on our judgement of the authors' caste identities, which we recognise could be higher, as the reportage relies on data collected by the governmental departments and ministries and international organisations, also dominated by the so-called upper-caste.

Several intersectional feminist, postcolonial and decolonial scholars across the world have shown that [citational politics](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308596124000314) (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308596124000314>) are never neutral. They represent epistemic authority, if [not epistemic](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/01634437251360382) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/01634437251360382>) violence, and reinforce existing power structures. Just as historically [elite white straight men](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/818132) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/818132>) have dominated the epistemic landscape, this report follows a similar trajectory by privileging elite upper-caste Nepali citizens (mostly men) and rendering indigenous, Dalit and lower-caste citizens of Nepal invisible.

This report not only highlights upper-caste bias in its citations but also establishes the validity of upper-caste knowledge in producing casteless labour migration in Nepal.

It is high time that our overview of the state of Nepal's labour migration began with the question of how caste matters. Taking a cue from the incisive work of Seira Tamang, we argue that this report, which ignores caste, [reflects a history of an exclusionary state run by high-caste, hill, male elites](https://brill.com/view/journals/ijgr/18/3/article-p293_2.xml?language=en&srsrtid=AfmBOorpm_dx9UrC1t5E4FRBSymW3BCLeqjvoRJoVwuxtCsay5BG42Ec) (https://brill.com/view/journals/ijgr/18/3/article-p293_2.xml?language=en&srsrtid=AfmBOorpm_dx9UrC1t5E4FRBSymW3BCLeqjvoRJoVwuxtCsay5BG42Ec).

For example, research highlights that [caste wage differentials in Nepal are substantial](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220388.2016.1189535) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220388.2016.1189535>), and labour migration provides one route to escape entrenched economic inequalities. Labour migration is a [choice](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02637758251365388) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02637758251365388>) for many Nepali citizens to break the cycle of intergenerational caste-based oppression.

Caste influences migration decisions, destinations and occupational outcomes. Hence, disaggregated caste data would allow researchers and policymakers to understand which caste groups have higher or lower migration rates; whether caste-based occupational segregation persists after migration; how migration either reduces legacies of caste-based oppression or reinforces them; exploitation of poor Dalit, indigenous, and so-called lower caste groups and their access to justice; and the relationship between caste and reintegration of returnee migrants.

We believe that with caste-disaggregated data, policymakers of Nepal could design targeted interventions for vulnerable caste groups, including migrant welfare schemes, housing support and labour rights protections. It will allow concerned labour migration actors to identify systemic discrimination in labour markets and inform affirmative action to ensure justice, thereby upholding the non-discriminatory provision (Article 24) enshrined in the [Constitution of Nepal](https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal_2072_Eng_www.moljpa.gov_.npDate-72_11_16.pdf) (https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal_2072_Eng_www.moljpa.gov_.npDate-72_11_16.pdf).

Whilst the Nepal Labour Migration Report 2024 is a comprehensive and valuable resource, its silence on caste perpetuates the myth that migration in Nepal is casteless. We ask: If the MoLESS can adopt 'gender-responsive migration policies', why should it not also adopt caste-responsive migration policies?



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