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Review of *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal* by Jeevan R. Sharma.

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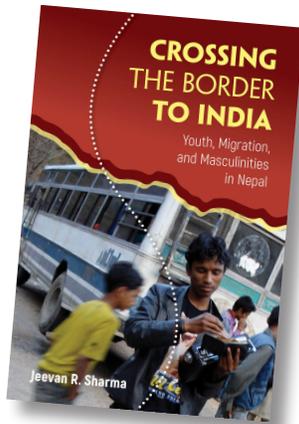
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Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal.

Jeevan R. Sharma. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018. 204 pages. ISBN 9781439914267

Reviewed by Tristan Bruslé

Noting migrants' invisibility in the Nepalese public debate, Sharma's *Crossing the Border to India* pays tribute to hundreds of thousands of men who toil in India for their family's survival in Nepal. Sharma's book is a welcome study of circular labor migration through the lens of masculinity. Following the migrants from their birthplace to their working place in Mumbai, he asserts that the migration experience is decisive for the making of the masculine identity of young men from the central district of Palpa. Through the study of workers whose geographic mobility offers "very little opportunity for social mobility" (p. 6), Sharma also intends to make the reader understand the cultural meaning of the migration experience, as told by migrants themselves.

Based on fieldwork spanning over ten years, Sharma's demonstration is convincing, bringing food for thought to several topics relating to labor migration, an ubiquitous and decisive social phenomena nowadays in Nepal.

It is key for a better understanding of migration to India, the most ancient and constant flow of people out of Nepal, and complements the few studies already made about this topic (Susan Thieme. 2006. *Social Networks and Migration: Far West Nepalese Labor Migrants in Delhi*. Münster: LIT Verlag; Sanjay Sharma and Deepak Thapa. 2013. *Taken for Granted. Nepali Migration to India*. Kathmandu: Center for the Study of Labor and Mobility Working).

Sharma's intentions are made clear in the introduction, with key concepts—such as livelihoods, gender and masculinities, structural violence—being used throughout the book. The concept of the culture of migration, used by Cohen (Jeffrey H. Cohen. 2004. *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press) about Mexican migration to the US, shows how labor migration has been entrenched in farmer's livelihoods for generations. Through the study of the specific vocabulary of work and migration used by men, Sharma enlivens the migrant's experiences. This goes together with Sharma's willingness, as shown in his departing from a neo-classical or Marxist theoretical framework, to illustrate how migrants are agents of their own migration, and not only victims or pawns of a system upon which they have no influence. But this agency is somehow constrained by the structural violence at home (i.e., the caste system and social inequalities), in India, and on the way. In this regard, descriptions of border crossing are particularly welcome as they offer primary testimonies of the violence, by state representatives, endured by men: the border is a place that plays "a key role in disciplining young Nepali men and turning them into docile migrants" (p. 101). Indeed, far from being resistant to violence, Nepalese workers have interiorized it, considering it

something normal. Sharma rightly points out how institutions, both Nepalese and international, also consider this suffering as normal, and subsequently do not consider it a topic of intervention, except when public health (that is, the AIDS epidemics) is concerned. The contrasts between the international awareness campaign for workers in Qatar and the oversight of Nepalese workers in India is striking.

Regarding the socioeconomic dimension of migration, Sharma insists on the divorce between people and farming. The diversification of livelihood means that "rural Nepal is increasingly integrated with the national and global economy and culture" (p. 44). Old patterns of caste relations are disappearing, whereas Dalit or other subjugated groups assert their rights to participate in society as "political and economic agents" (p. 50). This is in part the result of labor migration. According to Sharma, this transforming power of migration is, however, poorly taken into account by development agencies. Sharma, a lecturer in South Asia and International Development, is indeed concerned by the misplaced centrality of agriculture in development programmes. Both the development and scholarly world are subjects of a "sedentary bias" (p. 54) that views labor migration as a pathology (Jeevan Raj Sharma. 2008. "Practices of Male Labor Migration from the Hills of Nepal to India in Development Discourses: Which Pathology?." *Gender Technology and Development* 12 (3): 303–23). Regarding social sciences research in Nepal, his argument could be challenged given the booming scientific production about international migration since the 2000s and the few articles concerned with migrations to India in the 1970s (See, for example, the special issue of *L'ethnographie* in 1978).

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Bruslé on *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal*.

Labor migration to India is, for Sharma, a way to escape the oppressive social structure of the village, to travel, to face modernity, and to come back home a responsible man. But the reality of migrants' position in Indian cities leads them to be as exploited as the Indian proletariat. Their invisibility, partly due to their work as night watchmen (*caukidar*) hampers self-assertion at work. These "liminal beings" (p. 14) partly find satisfaction in consumption, which represents a small facet of the men's crave for modernity and a way to assert themselves as men in their home village.

Sharma's book is easy to read and the numerous quotations enable the reader to get an inner view of the migrants' world. However, as the book is also written for "non specialist readers" (p. 6), Nepal specialists would sometimes ask for deeper analysis, especially because Sharma perfectly handles both the language of the people and the theoretical framework. To this end, as Sharma is from the place where he does his fieldwork, one would have been interested in better understanding his position in the local society. Having a few socio-economic data about the interviewed migrants, especially in terms of caste and land ownership, would also have helped better illustrate the local reality of migrants' life, and the differential strategies employed according to their socioeconomic

background. More generally, explanations about his choice of fieldwork and his methodology are absent. At last, the author could have worked the idea of consumption a little further. The reader does not really understand how consumption is part of a strategy "to defend their decency and dignity" (p. 149), particularly because theirs is not really prestige consumption in the villages themselves. More examples and men's words are needed to assert the argument more convincingly.

Apart from these few drawbacks, Sharma's book is fully recommendable, both for those interested in migration and masculinity studies and for those who want to better understand migrants' mindset in a time of mass migration from Nepal.

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