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Rural Nepal's Political Economy: Dependency, Migration, and Agricultural Stagnation

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Abstract

Nepal's agricultural sector, central to rural livelihoods, is shaped by structural underdevelopment and economic dependency, influenced by imports, remittances, and migration. This study examines the relationships and combined impact of these factors on agriculture's contribution to GDP using 25 years of secondary data (2000–2024) from the World Bank, analyzed through correlation and regression in SPSS 25. Findings highlight the negative influence of imports and remittances, reflecting Nepal's core-periphery economic structure, while migration shows minimal direct effect. The results underscore how reliance on external flows perpetuates rural marginalization and limits sectoral growth. The study emphasizes the need for policies that strengthen domestic agriculture, reduce external dependency, and promote sustainable, inclusive rural development, ensuring that growth translates into broader structural transformation.

Keywords: political economy, center-periphery, underdevelopment, growth and stagnation, Nepal

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1. Introduction

Nepal's rural economy functions within a political-economic system characterized by persistent underdevelopment, driven by unequal power dynamics, structural disparities, and a pronounced core-periphery divide. Historically and currently, state development strategies have systematically favored urban and core areas politically, administratively, and economically, leading to the institutional marginalization of rural regions. This neglect manifests in insufficient investment, infrastructure, and policy focus, perpetuating cycles of economic stagnation and disarticulation (Dhakal & Paudel, 2023). Consequently, rural areas remain structurally disadvantaged, with agriculture as the primary livelihood for many, experiencing prolonged decline.

Despite its critical role in food security and rural employment, the contribution of agriculture, forestry, and fishing to Nepal's GDP has consistently decreased over the last twenty years. This paradox, where national economic growth coexists with rural stagnation, exemplifies what dependency and structuralism theorists term "uneven development": aggregate indicators improve while marginalized sectors and regions see no corresponding gains (Chaudhary, 2020). Nepal's rural underdevelopment is thus not merely a technical failure but a reflection of political-economic priorities that value external flows like remittances and imports over internal structural transformation.

The rapid expansion of remittances (now 26–30% of GDP) epitomizes this dependency. While temporarily reducing poverty and boosting consumption, remittances have simultaneously reduced agricultural labor participation and entrenched a rentier economy reliant on foreign employment (Chhetri et al., 2020; Thapa-Parajuli et al., 2025). Migration from rural areas to cities or abroad further intensifies farm labor shortages. Remittance income is often channeled into non-productive uses like housing and consumption rather than productive investments, worsening the fragility of rural production systems (Tuladhar et al., 2014; Ghimire & Kapri, 2020).

This dynamic illustrates a classic contradiction in Nepal's political economy: macroeconomic growth driven by external flows occurs alongside a lack of structural change in the domestic rural economy. This "growth without development," typical of peripheral economies in dependency theory, sees rising GDP obscure widening socio-economic disparities between the urban core and rural periphery (Koirala & Bashyal, 2025). The uneven trajectory hinders inclusive and sustainable rural transformation, instead revealing how global and national political-economic relations systematically reproduce rural underdevelopment.

This study has examined aspects of Nepal's rural structure and remittance rise, yet research holistically analyzing these dynamics through a political economy and core-periphery lens remains limited. Existing literature often isolates remittances, agricultural decline, and migration, failing to adequately situate them within broader systems of resource distribution, policy neglect, and institutional power imbalances. The paradox of macroeconomic growth alongside rural stagnation, particularly as a manifestation of peripheral underdevelopment, has received insufficient attention. A significant gap exists in integrating these issues into a coherent framework that demonstrates how central dominance in governance and investment perpetuates rural marginalization. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing Nepal's rural stagnation through a political economy perspective, emphasizing core-periphery inequalities and linking remittance dependency, agricultural decline, and migration to overarching processes of structural inequality and underdevelopment.

2. Problem Statement

Nepal's rural economy is fundamentally shaped by a political economy characterized by underdevelopment, structural dependency, and persistent core-periphery disparities. Key rural sectors—agriculture, forestry, and fishing—which have long sustained rural livelihoods, are experiencing a declining share of GDP, indicative of deeper stagnation in rural productive capacity. Despite substantial inflows of remittances and significant labor migration, anticipated improvements in rural productivity and sustainability have not been realized.

The rising ratio of imports to GDP underscores a growing dependence on foreign goods and services, revealing weaknesses in domestic production, particularly within the rural agrarian economy. Concurrently, while personal remittances provide vital income for rural households, they have inadvertently reduced agricultural labor participation and intensified rural economic dependency (Dhakal & Paudel, 2023; Ghimire & Kapri, 2020). Persistent net outmigration from peripheral rural areas to cities or international labor markets further entrenches demographic imbalances, deepening the center-periphery development gap (Koirala & Bashyal, 2025). Although imports, remittances, and net migration have been examined individually, their combined impact on the declining contribution of agriculture to GDP lacks thorough empirical and theoretical exploration. This crucial oversight obscures the structural forces and policy deficiencies perpetuating rural stagnation and developmental exclusion within Nepal's political economy.

3. Theoretical Review

The political economy perspective offers a broad framework for analyzing development by focusing on the influence of power structures, institutional arrangements, and historical contexts. It emphasizes that economic outcomes and social progress are deeply connected to political governance and global systems of influence (Bardhan, 2005). In Nepal, this approach sheds light on why rural regions often experience economic stagnation and receive limited attention in national development policies.

The center-periphery model, derived from dependency theory, highlights persistent inequalities between dominant regions (the center) and marginalized areas (the periphery) (Prebisch, 1950). Within this structure, rural parts of Nepal function as the periphery, heavily depending on urban areas and foreign economies for employment, goods, and investment. This dependence restricts independent development and sustains long-term underdevelopment.

Underdevelopment theory, advanced by Frank (1967), challenges the idea that underdevelopment is simply an early stage of development. Instead, it asserts that underdevelopment results from unequal and exploitative relationships between global and national actors, whereby resources, labor, and capital are extracted from peripheral regions to benefit the core, leaving the periphery deliberately disadvantaged. While economic growth is often viewed as a primary indicator of national progress, it does not ensure inclusive development (Todaro & Smith, 2020). In the context of Nepal, economic expansion is frequently urban-centered, neglecting rural areas and deepening disparities in income, services, and opportunities.

Stagnation refers to the prolonged lack of progress in sectors like agriculture or regions such as rural Nepal. It is typically caused by low levels of investment, structural constraints, and the outward flow of labor and resources (Byres, 2003). These conditions create a cycle of marginalization, dependency, and continued economic stagnation.

4. Empirical review

Koirala and Bashyal (2025) explored the interplay between migration, economic development, and socio-ecological changes in Nepal. By reviewing 42 carefully chosen scholarly articles, they employed thematic analysis to outline four major themes: the use effect of remittances on individual livelihoods, the offset effect related to land use, the substitution effect due to workforce reduction, and the neglect effect resulting from fewer active household members managing land. The study highlights the critical need to understand these interconnected impacts to guide effective policy aligned with Nepal's broader economic goals.

Thapa-Parajuli et al. (2025) investigated the impact of remittances on household spending patterns in rural Nepal, drawing on data from the World Bank's Nepal Household Risk and Vulnerability Survey Panel (2016–2018).Utilizing instrumental variable regression, they measured how remittance inflows affect different consumption categories. Their findings indicate that remittances significantly boost overall household spending, particularly on essential needs such as food, education, and healthcare, contributing to improved nutrition and human capital. Importantly, they found no notable increase in spending on non-productive items like tobacco and alcohol.

Research by Dhakal and Paudel (2023) investigated the trends and economic implications of remittances in Nepal using secondary data from official reports and academic publications. Applying descriptive statistics and correlation analysis through MS Excel, their findings reveal a rising trend in remittance inflows. Nepal ranks 19th globally in remittance receipts and their share of GDP. Remittances are strongly positively associated with GDP, trade deficit, consumption, and capital formation, while showing a negative correlation with agricultural GDP. The relationship with inflation was positive but weak.

Chhetri and Dhakal (2020) examined the status of remittance and its economic effects using secondary data and statistical methods. They observed a yearly rise in the number of Nepalis seeking foreign employment, with Malaysia as the top destination, followed by Gulf countries. Their analysis showed no significant link between remittance inflows and the expansion of agricultural land. Nonetheless, remittances have supported poverty and unemployment reduction, helped sustain foreign exchange reserves, and improved the balance of payments. A strong positive correlation was observed between remittance inflows and GDP, while a significant negative relationship was found between remittances and the GDP share of agriculture, forestry, and fishing.

Ghimire and Kapri (2020) assessed how different types of remittances—earned and unearned—affect agricultural productivity in Nepal. Using a three-stage least squares (3-SLS) model to address endogeneity concerns, they found that earned remittances had a greater impact on agricultural productivity compared to unearned remittances, suggesting that the two types have distinct economic effects. Similarly, Chaudhary (2020) examined how two decades of remittance inflows have influenced the social, economic, and political conditions of migrant households. The study identified remittances as crucial for improving living standards, reducing poverty, and raising political and social awareness. Migrant households experienced notable income growth, enabling higher spending capacity and asset acquisition. Many formerly landless families acquired land, and access to modern technology improved significantly among these households, unlike their non-migrant counterparts.

Likewise, Tuladhar et al. (2014) explored the effects of migration and remittances on agricultural output through descriptive and correlation analysis. They found that migration negatively impacts agricultural yields due to labor shortages. Moreover, although remittance-recipient households had increased income, they did not invest in agricultural tools or inputs that could enhance productivity. The study highlights two key points: labor migration reduces available agricultural labor, and remittances are not being channeled into productivity-enhancing investments in the agricultural sector.

Research on migration and remittances in Nepal highlights complex and sometimes contradictory effects on rural households and agriculture. Studies show that remittances improve household income, consumption, nutrition, education, and overall living standards (Thapa-Parajuli et al., 2025; Chaudhary, 2020; Dhakal & Paudel, 2023). However, remittances often do not translate into investments that enhance agricultural productivity, and labor migration reduces the available workforce, negatively affecting farm output (Tuladhar et al., 2014; Chhetri & Dhakal, 2020). While some research distinguishes between earned and unearned remittances (Ghimire & Kapri, 2020) or explores socio-ecological effects (Koirala & Bashyal, 2025), there remains a gap in understanding the combined macro- and micro-level impacts of migration and remittances on rural economic development. Specifically, few studies systematically examine how dependency on remittances interacts with declining agricultural contribution to GDP and long-term underdevelopment in rural Nepal, indicating the need for research that links household-level dynamics with broader political-economic outcomes.

5. Research Objectives

The research has set the following objectives and hypotheses.

5.1 Objectives

- To analyze the relationship between total imports to GDP, remittance inflows in USD, and net migrations with the percentage contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP.
- To examine the impact of total imports, remittances, and net migration on the contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP.

5.2 Hypotheses

- **H_1:** Total imports to GDP have a significant impact on the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP in Nepal.
- **H_2:** Amount of remittance in USD has a significant impact on the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP in Nepal.
- **H_3:** Net migrations have a significant impact on the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP in Nepal.

6. Methodology

The causal research design is used with the population as all annual economic records of Nepal relevant to agriculture, remittance, and migration up to the present time. The sample of the study consists of 25 yearly observations of Nepal-related variables from 2000 to 2024. The data are secondary in nature and collected from the World Bank. Correlation and regression analyses are used. The data analysis tool is SPSS version 25. The dependent variable is the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP (Y), and the independent variables are total imports to GDP (X_1), amount of remittance in USD (X_2), and net migrations (X_3). The results are analyzed using Pearson correlation and regression. The regression model is:

Model 1: $Y = \alpha + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + e$

Table 1 presents the key variables used in the study along with their measurements and theoretical justifications. The dependent variable captures the contribution of agriculture, forestry, and fishing to GDP as a proxy for rural economic stagnation, while the independent variables—imports, remittances, and net migration—represent factors linked to economic dependency, labor outmigration, and center-periphery demographic imbalances.

Table 1 *Variable and their measurement*

Type	Variable	Measurement	Theoretical Justification
Dependent (Y)	Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (%of GDP)	Percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP	Proxy for rural economic stagnation
Independent 1 (X_1)	Imports of goods and services (% of GDP)	Ratio of total imports to GDP	Economic dependency and weak rural production
Independent 2 (X_2)	Personal remittance received (USD)	Amount remittance in USD	labor out migration and dependency on external income
Independent 3 (X4)	Net migrations	Total number (immigrants − emigrants)	Center-periphery demographic imbalance

Source: World Bank

7. Findings

The study examines how key economic factors influence the contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP. Correlation analysis reveals the strength and direction of relationships between the agricultural GDP share and variables such as imports, remittances, and net migration. Table 2 presents the correlation analysis of the variables. The correlation between imports to GDP and the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP is negative (−0.707) and statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). The correlation between the amount of remittance in USD and the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP is also negative (−0.935) and significant ($p = 0.000$). The correlation between net migrations and the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP is negative (−0.044) but not significant ($p = 0.836$).

Table 2 *Correlations Analysis*

	Percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP	Ratio of total imports to GDP	Amount remittance in USD	Net migrations
Percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP	1			
Total imports to GDP	-.709**	1		
Amount remittance in USD	-.935**	.587**	1	
Net migrations	-.044	.176	-.093	1

Source: World Bank

The correlation analysis shows that higher imports and remittance inflows are strongly associated with a lower contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP, while net migration has no significant effect.

Likewise, the following findings present the impact of imports, remittances, and net migration on the contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP. The regression results indicate that together, these factors explain 91.9% of the variation in agricultural contribution, with imports and remittances showing a statistically significant negative effect, while net migration is not significant. Table 3 shows the impact of the independent and dependent variables. The R^2 value of 0.919 represents the combined effect of total imports to GDP, remittance inflows in USD, and net migration on the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP, accounting for 91.9% of the variation. The remaining 8.1% of the variation is attributed to other factors not covered in this study. Overall, the model is statistically significant, as indicated by the p-value of 0.000.

Table 3 *Regression Analysis*

Variables	B	Sig	VIF
Constant	44.095	.000	1.662
Total imports to GDP	-0.298	.014	1.625
Amount remittance in USD	-1.208	.000	1.099
Net migrations	-2.713	.223	1.662
R-Square	0.919		
F-change	79.51	0.000	

Source: World Bank

The impact of total imports to GDP on the percentage contribution of agriculture to GDP is negative and statistically significant, as indicated by a beta value of -0.298 and a significance level of 0.014. Similarly, the impact of remittance inflows in USD on agriculture's contribution to GDP is negative and significant, with a beta value of -1.208 and a significance level of 0.000. In contrast, the impact of net migrations on agricultural GDP contribution is negative but not significant, with a beta value of -2.713 and a significance value of 0.223.

8. Objective Results

The first objective, analyzing the relationship between total imports to GDP, remittances in USD, and net migrations with the percentage contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP, is supported by the correlation analysis. Results show that both total imports and remittances have a strong and significant negative relationship with agriculture's GDP contribution, whereas net migration exhibits a weak and insignificant negative relationship. This indicates that higher import reliance and remittance inflows are associated with a declining share of agriculture in GDP, while migration does not show a statistically significant direct correlation.

The second objective, examining the impact of these variables on agricultural contribution, is confirmed through regression analysis. The model explains 91.9% of the variation in agriculture's GDP share. Total imports and remittances have a statistically significant negative impact, while net migration has a negative but statistically insignificant effect. These results highlight the dominant influence of imports and remittances on the sector's declining economic contribution, validating the study's focus on macroeconomic drivers.

9. Hypotheses Results

The three hypotheses were tested using correlation and regression results. H_1 (total imports significantly impact agricultural GDP share) and H_2 (remittances significantly impact agricultural GDP share) are accepted, as both variables show strong negative and statistically significant effects. H_3 (net migration significantly impacts agricultural GDP share) is not accepted, given its negative but statistically insignificant effect. These outcomes confirm that while imports and remittances are key factors influencing agriculture's economic contribution, net migration does not have a direct measurable effect in the model, highlighting the complex dynamics of rural labor and macroeconomic change.

10. Discussions

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence on the complex relationships between total imports to GDP, remittance inflows, net migration, and the contribution of agriculture to Nepal's GDP. Both correlation and regression analyses indicate that total imports and remittances exert a strong and statistically significant negative effect on agriculture's share of GDP, while net migration has a weak and statistically insignificant effect. These results align with the political economy and dependency frameworks discussed in the literature, highlighting structural factors that shape rural stagnation and uneven development in Nepal.

10.1 Imports, Remittances, and Agricultural Decline

The negative relationship between imports and agricultural contribution underscores the vulnerability of Nepal's rural economy to external dependence. As the regression analysis shows, total imports explain a significant portion of the decline in agricultural GDP, reflecting patterns of core-periphery dependency. This aligns with Byres (2003) and Frank (1967), who argue that peripheral regions are systematically disadvantaged when resources, labor, and capital are extracted to support core regions. In the Nepalese context, increasing import dependency reduces incentives for domestic agricultural production, contributing to stagnation in rural livelihoods.

Similarly, remittance inflows have a strong negative impact on agriculture's share of GDP. This finding confirms earlier research by Chhetri et al. (2020), Dhakal and Paudel (2023), and Tuladhar et al. (2014), which highlight that while remittances improve household income, they often fail to translate into productive investment in agriculture. Remittances, although critical for household consumption, health, and education (Thapa-Parajuli et al., 2025; Chaudhary, 2020), contribute to a rentier economy that diminishes labor participation in farming and weakens local production systems. The findings also resonate with Koirala and Bashyal (2025), who describe the "substitution effect," wherein remittances reduce the active workforce in agriculture, indirectly limiting productivity.

10.2 Migration and Labor Dynamics

Interestingly, net migration exhibits a negative but statistically insignificant effect on agriculture's GDP contribution. While migration is often cited as a driver of labor shortages in rural areas, this study suggests that its direct effect on agricultural output may be less pronounced than that of macroeconomic factors like imports and remittances. This aligns with observations by Tuladhar et al. (2014) and Chhetri and Dhakal (2020), which highlight that migration primarily interacts with agricultural productivity through labor substitution and household labor allocation, rather than producing a directly measurable impact at the macroeconomic level. It also indicates that remittance-led consumption and import dependency may overshadow the direct effects of labor migration on agricultural contribution.

10.3 Integration with Literature

The findings support the theoretical framing of uneven development and center-periphery disparities. As noted in the introduction and theoretical review, Nepal's rural periphery is structurally disadvantaged due to historical and ongoing political-economic prioritization of urban cores (Dhakal & Paudel, 2023; Prebisch, 1950). The observed negative effects of imports and remittances confirm that macroeconomic growth does not automatically translate into rural development, reflecting the "growth without development" paradox described by Koirala and Bashyal (2025).

Empirical studies reviewed in this research also reinforce the observed patterns. For instance, Thapa-Parajuli et al. (2025) and Chaudhary (2020) emphasize that remittances enhance household well-being but do not necessarily promote productive investment in agriculture, which aligns with the study's regression results. Ghimire and Kapri (2020) distinguish between earned and unearned remittances, suggesting that the type of remittance may further moderate its impact on agricultural productivity. This nuance highlights the need for future research to disaggregate remittance types when assessing their economic consequences.

Additionally, the thematic insights from Koirala and Bashyal (2025)—use, offset, substitution, and neglect effects of remittances—help explain why remittance inflows, while improving living standards, can still contribute to agricultural decline. Households increasingly prioritize consumption over investment in land, labor, and agricultural technology, reinforcing a dependency-driven cycle of underdevelopment. Tuladhar et al. (2014) similarly note that while remittance households have higher incomes, they often avoid investing in productivity-enhancing tools, which contributes to stagnation in rural agricultural output.

10.4 Policy and Structural Implications

The combined insights from the literature and empirical results point to a systemic issue: Nepal's rural periphery remains dependent on external financial flows and vulnerable to structural inequalities. High reliance on imports and remittances perpetuates a cycle of stagnation, labor substitution, and declining agricultural GDP contribution. The findings reinforce the need for policies that promote productive use of remittances, strengthen domestic agricultural production, and reduce overdependence on imports. Targeted interventions could include incentives for agricultural investment, rural infrastructure development, and mechanisms to channel remittances into productivity-enhancing projects, thereby addressing both immediate household needs and long-term sectoral sustainability.

In summary, the discussion highlights that Nepal's rural agricultural economy is deeply shaped by structural and macroeconomic factors, particularly imports and remittance inflows, which exert strong and significant negative effects on agriculture's contribution to GDP. While net migration shows a weak and statistically insignificant effect, the findings suggest that macro-level financial dependencies overshadow the direct impact of labor movement. The study integrates these results with the literature, confirming that remittances often improve household well-being but do not translate into productive agricultural investment, contributing to a rentier economy and reduced labor participation in farming. Imports further weaken domestic agricultural incentives, reflecting center-periphery and dependency dynamics that sustain rural stagnation. The discussion underscores the need for policy interventions that channel remittances into productive uses, promote domestic agricultural investment, and reduce overreliance on imports, thereby supporting sustainable rural development and addressing structural inequalities in Nepal's political economy.

11. Conclusion

This study concludes that Nepal's rural agricultural economy is deeply shaped by a political-economic structure of dependency and uneven development, where high reliance on imports and remittance inflows significantly reduces agriculture's contribution to GDP, while net migration has minimal direct effect. The findings highlight the interaction between household-level financial behaviors and broader macroeconomic forces, reflecting structural and policy-related drivers of rural underdevelopment. The study underscores the need for integrated policy interventions that promote the productive use of remittances, strengthen agricultural infrastructure and technology, and reduce overdependence on imports to enhance rural economic resilience. Future research could examine the differentiated impacts of earned versus unearned remittances, explore household-level behavior in relation to macroeconomic trends, and identify policy frameworks that effectively link remittance flows, local production systems, and labor migration patterns to support inclusive and sustainable rural development in Nepal.

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