

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION FROM NEPAL: A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF SHIFTING TRENDS AND EVOLVING PATTERNS

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive retrospective analysis of international labor migration, highlighting key trends and patterns in Nepal from 1952/54 to 2024/25. Utilizing quantitative methods and analyzing data on the absentee population abroad from multiple censuses (Nepal and India) and the number of labour permits issued, the study identifies three broad streams of foreign labour migration: to India (Before 1990), to Gulf States and Malaysia (1990–2020), and post-COVID migration to Central & Eastern European countries. By applying the theoretical framework of push-pull factors, intervening obstacles, and a migration system approach, the study explores how economic disparities, political instability, changes in labour policies, natural disasters, bilateral labour agreements, and the COVID-19 restrictions have continuously shaped the foreign employment trends and patterns. Findings reveal that the government issued over 7.3 million new labour permits since 1993/94. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Malaysia (after 1997) remain the leading labour destinations, predominantly male (over 82%). However, the increasing trend towards Romania, Croatia, the Maldives, and Cyprus after COVID-19 indicates the shift toward newer labour markets, and are female preferred destinations. Furthermore, the origin areas of migrants have shifted from the Western Hills (1942–1961) to the Southern Terai (2008–2025), specifically the Madhesh and Koshi Provinces. Districts like Dhanusha and Jhapa now lead in formal labor exports. Despite a steady decline in migration to India, it still shares 34% of the absentee population according to the 2021 census of Nepal.

Keywords: *International labour migration, Nepal, trends and patterns, origin and destination*

Introduction

The initial wave of international labour migration from Nepal started in the eighteenth century, driven by heavy taxation, political instability, government regulations, and agricultural transformation (Sharma, 2013). The treaty signed with the East India Company in 1816 formalized the foreign labour migration of Nepalese youth being recruited into the British Army (Kansakar, 1974; Khatiwada, 2014). The international labour migration to the Indian sub-continent and the Tibet region of China persisted until the late 1980s. After the enactment of the “Foreign Employment Act” in 1985, the traditional trend of foreign labour migration to India redefined and shifted towards the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries and Malaysia (MoLE, 2014).

The trend of migrant workers moving abroad further expanded towards Korea, Japan, Israel, and central & eastern European countries following the COVID-19 pandemic (MoLESS, 2022). The Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has issued more than 5.5 million labour permits between 2008/09 and 2023/24 (NSO, 2025). International labour migration has been an important way of earning for Nepalese households, reducing local poverty, affecting and/or influencing rural societies, and most importantly, heavily contributing to the national economy (Adhikari et al., 2023). In the fiscal year 2024/25, remittance inflows to Nepal were NPR 176.32 billion, an increase of 17.2% from the previous fiscal year, contributing 33.1% to the national GDP (World Bank, 2025). Despite some fluctuation over the years, the proportion of households receiving remittances in 1995/96 was 23.4%. The figure increased to 55.8% in 2010/11 and further increased to 61.55% in 2024/25 (Thapa, 2023; World Bank, 2025).

Even with the continuous growth in remittance inflow and the rising number of outflows of labour migrants looking for employment abroad, significant changes and shifts in the trend and patterns of international labour migration are noticed over time. These changes and shifts in the trends and patterns are shaped by changes in labour regulations and policies in both origin and destination countries, the Gulf economic boom, the 2007/08 global recession, political conflicts and warfare, natural calamities, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, this study aims to address the following objectives:

- To review and analyze the historical trends and patterns of international labour migration in Nepal from 1952/54 to 2024/25.
- To examine key drivers associated with major shifts in the destination countries of migrant workers and the resulting impacts of these changes on the migration streams.

Theoretical Framework

Ravenstein's two seminal papers from 1885 and 1889 are widely regarded as the foundation of migration theories (Ravenstein, 1885; Ravenstein, 1889). The theory outlines the barrier factors determining the migration from origin to destination as intervening obstacles that can be physical, socio/cultural, economic, or political. In 1966, Everett Lee presented an extensive theory regarding migration. Lee describes migration as resulting from "push" and "pull" factors found in both the source and the target locations, shaped by the attributes of these regions (Lee, 1966). In the case of Nepal, "Push" and "Pull" factors can be used to explain and understand the trend and different patterns of international labour migration through macro-level and micro-level processes (MoLE, 2014).

The migration system theory, introduced prominently by Mabogunje (1970), has served as a foundational framework for studying migration trends and patterns by shifting attention from traditional push-pull factors-based explanation to a more comprehensive and dynamic system shaped by historical ties, trade and economic interdependence, bilateral agreement/legal framework, and colonial past. Despite the widespread use of system perspective in migration studies since the 1970s, the power relations within the system are underexplored and less discussed in the recent migration studies (Tagliacozzo et al., 2024).

Methods and Materials

This study is based on quantitative methods primarily grounded on two secondary data sources: (i) population absent abroad data from the 1942 to 2021 censuses of Nepal and India, and (ii) number of labour permits issued by DoFE, Nepal, from 1993/94 to 2024/25. Other publications from the National Statistics Office (NSO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM), the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS), and the World Bank were reviewed to identify the causes associated with shifting trends and patterns of migration.

Labour migration data available in different censuses of Nepal, surveys, and the Foreign Employment Information Management System (FEIMS) developed by DoFE possess distinct strengths, limitations, certain gaps, and discrepancies (Kollmair et al., 2006; MoLESS, 2022). Hence, changing and shifting trends and patterns of migration over time were examined and compared using both the absent population abroad data from different censuses of Nepal and India, and the number of new labour permits issued by the DoFE, Nepal. Additionally, theoretical frameworks were applied to an-

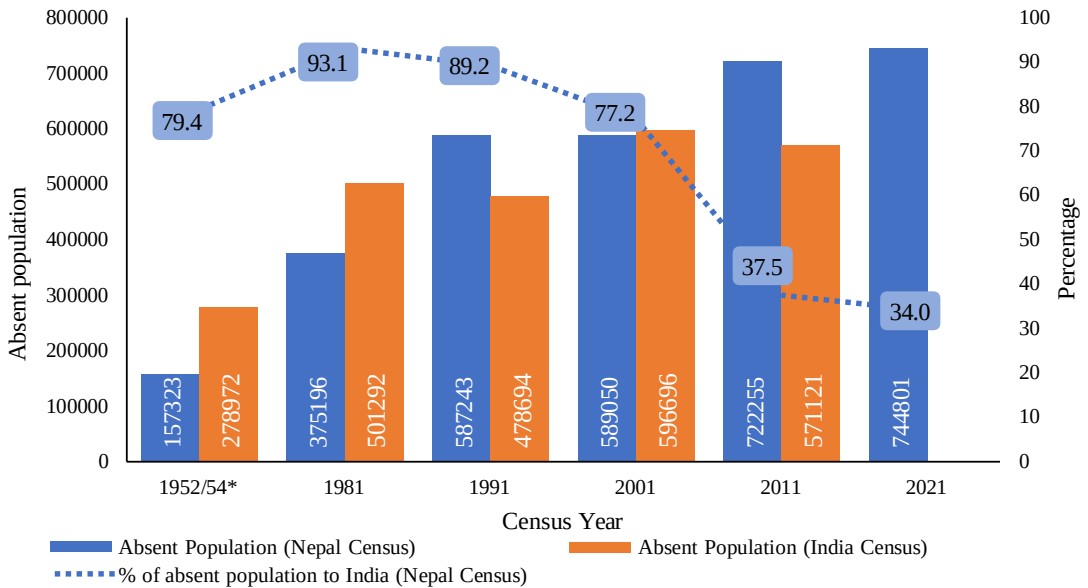
alyze and interpret the underlying causes shaping migration trends and patterns, focusing on push and pull factors (Lee, 1966), intervening obstacles (Ravenstein, 1885; Ravenstein, 1889), allied to origin and destination countries, along with the migration system theory (Mabogunje, 1970), exploring the interdependent relationship between sending and receiving countries.

Results and Discussions

Trends in Labour Migration to India

The first wave of international labour migration to India from Nepal occurred in the early 19th century due to the changes in the agricultural system and government policies, which forced some hill farmers to leave their land and seek new employment opportunities outside Nepal (Sharma, 2012; Regmi, 1978). A documented history of migration of Nepalese workers to India from Nepal can be found since the period of the Sugauli Treaty, which was signed in 1816 between the government of Nepal and the East India Company. (Bhandari, 2007; Bhandari, 2023). Despite a long history of cross-border labour migration from Nepal to India, it is difficult to determine the actual number of Nepalese residing and working in India, due particularly to the open border between Nepal and India, irregular migration, dual citizenship, seasonal migration, human trafficking and a long history of permanent settlement of Nepalese in India (Sharma & Thapa, 2013; Sijapati et al., 2015).

Estimates of Nepalese workers in India vary widely. General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) reports 2.8 million (Rimal, 1997), Dixit et al. (1997) estimate around 1 million, Seddon et al. (2001 & 2002) estimate around 1.3 million, Thieme (2006) estimates 3 million, Kollmair et al. (2006) estimates 0.9 million, Adhikari & Gurung (2009) estimate 0.2 million (only in Delhi), Sharma & Thapa (2013) estimate 0.89 million, Hausner & Sharma (2013) estimate over 2 million, Sharma (2013) estimates 1.2–1.5 million, CBS (2019) reveals 1 million, Bashyal (2020) estimates 0.3 million (in Delhi), and IOM (2022 & 2023) reveals 0.7 million in India. Between 1996 and 2008, around 350,000–400,000 people were displaced by the Maoist insurgency, many moving to India (IOM, 2022). In western Nepal, nearly every household has at least one member who works in India (Thieme, 2006). Overall, these studies highlight significant discrepancies in the actual number of Nepalese living and working in India (Kollmair et al., 2006; Thapa, 2016).

Figure 1*Nepalese Population in India: Census Data from Nepal and India¹*

Source: Kansakar (2003); Sharma & Thapa (2013); IOM (2019); NSO (2023, 2025); Census of India (<https://censusindia.gov.in>)

¹ The 2021 Census of India was postponed, and is currently being conducted as the Census 2026–27

* The Nepal Census (1952–54) and the India Census (1951) were conducted in non-overlapping periods

Foreign employment in Nepal is regulated by the DoFE, which issues work permits to eligible migrants. However, the current Foreign Employment Act does not cover Nepalese living and working in India (MoLESS, 2022). Thus, the most reliable data on Nepalese migrants in India come from the national population censuses of both countries. Nepal's 1952–54 census was the first to record absentee population by sex, age, and destination (Kansakar, 2005). It showed India as the dominant destination, with 157,323 migrants, which constitutes 79.4% of Nepal's total absentee population. In contrast, India's 1951 census recorded 278,972 Nepalese residents, a difference of 121,649 compared to Nepal's figures, highlighting a substantial data discrepancy (Figure 1).

The 1961 Nepal census recorded total emigrants but did not provide details by destination or sex, while the 1971 census gathered data only for the de jure (resident) population, excluding the de facto (absent) population (Kansakar, 2003; Kansakar, 2005). As shown in Figure 1, the 1981 census of Nepal marked the peak of Nepal–

India migration, with 375,196 migrants, of which 93.1% are the absent population to India. In contrast, the 1981 Indian census recorded 501,292 Nepalese living and working in India, a discrepancy of 126,096 people. The enactment of the Foreign Employment Act in 1985 opened legal avenues for Nepalese workers to seek employment overseas (Bhandari, 2003; Bhandari, 2023). Following the restoration of democracy in 1990, Nepal adopted economic liberalization policies and actively promoted foreign employment to meet rising labour demand in Middle East countries (MoLE, 2014). Consequently, the long-standing pattern of labour migration to India began shifting toward the Middle East from the early 1990s onward.

Despite policy shifts after 1990, India remained the primary destination for Nepali migrants in the 1991 and 2001 censuses of Nepal, accounting for 89.2% and 77.2% of all emigrants. In the 1991 census, 587,243 people migrated to India, showing an increase of 212,047 from 1981, though its overall share declined by 3.9%. By the 2001 census, the number rose slightly to 589,050, but the proportion continued to fall to 77.2%, down from 89.2% in the 1991 and 93.1% in the 1981 censuses. Consistent with past discrepancies, the 2001 figures differed slightly between the two countries: Nepal recorded 589,050 migrants in India, while India reported 596,696. Although migration to India continued, the 2011 census recorded a sharp decline in its share from 77.2% in the 2001 census to 37.5%, with a further drop to 34% in the 2021 census despite a small increase of 22,546 in absolute numbers (Bhattarai et al., 2023). The continuous decline of Nepalese migrant workers from India towards GCC countries and Malaysia largely restructured the Nepalese economy from an agriculture-based country to a re-mittance-dependent system (Giri, 2025).

Trends in Labour Migration beyond India (Mainly GCC Countries and Malaysia)

Migration beyond the national border started in Nepal during the country's unification efforts more than 300 years ago. The official era of international migration began in the early nineteenth century through the recruitment of young Nepalese individuals in the British Army (Adhikari et al., 2023). Data on migration were documented since the census of 1920; the total absent population abroad, accounting for 87,722, was published in the 1942 Census of Nepal (Kansakar, 2003; Kansakar, 2005).

In the 1952/54 census, 198,120 people were recorded as absent abroad, with 20.6% (40,797) migrating beyond India, of which 87.6% were male. The 1961 and 1971 censuses reported only total absentee figures without identifying destination countries (Table 1). By the 1981 census, the absent population had risen to 402,977, but only 6.9% (27,781) were outside India, showing a decline of 31.9% (13,016) compared to the 1952/54 census. The unusually high number of migrants recorded in the 1952/54

census was largely due to: (i) heavy recruitment of Nepali youths into British Gurkha regiments between 1948 and 1956 during the communist insurgency in Malaya, and (ii) strong labour demand in Malaya's rubber, sugar, and palm plantations (Kansakar, 2003).

Table 1

Population Absent Abroad, Nepal (1942-2021)

Census Year	Total Population	Total absent population	Total absent (%)	Absent beyond India	Absent beyond India (%)	Male absent	Male absent (%)	Female absent	Female absent (%)
1942	6283649	87722	1.4	NA	-	NA	-	NA	-
1952/54	8473478	198120	2.3	40797	20.6	173619	87.6	24501	12.4
1961	9741466	328470	3.4	NA	-	NA	-	NA	-
1971	11555983	NA	-	NA	-	NA	-	NA	-
1981	15425816	402977	2.6	27781	6.9	328448	81.5	74529	18.5
1991	19149387	658290	3.4	71047	10.8	548002	83.2	110288	16.8
2001	23499115	762201	3.2	173151	22.7	679489	89.1	82712	10.9
2011	26494504	1921494	7.3	1199239	62.4	1684029	87.6	237400	12.4
2021	29164578	2190592	7.5	1445791	66.0	1799675	82.2	390917	17.8

Source: Kansakar (2003, 2005); CBS (2002, 2012, 2014); NSO (2023, 2025)

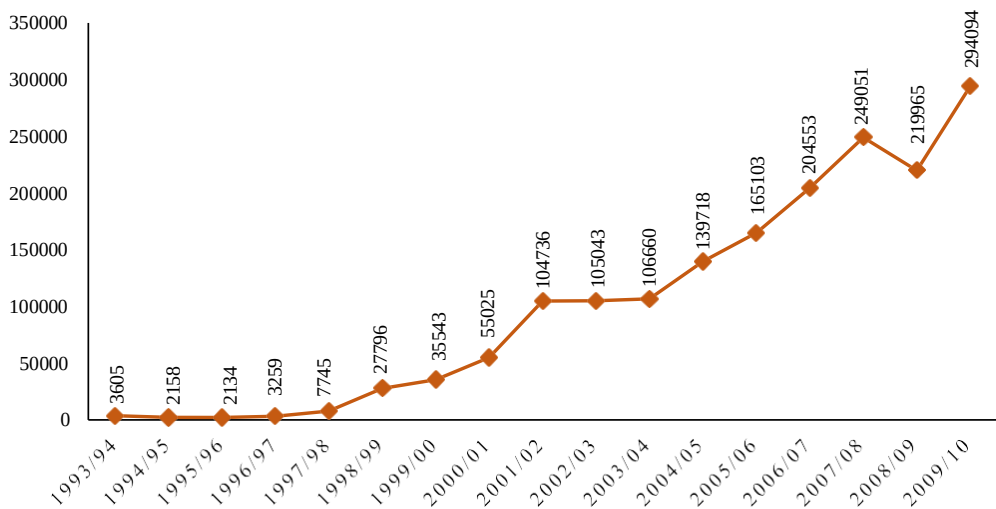
Note: The census of 1961 only provided the total absent population, and the 1971 census did not include records on the absent population.

When Nepal officially opened foreign employment to the Gulf States in the early 1990s, the long-standing pattern of labour migration to India began to decline (Bhandari, 2023). Table 1 shows a rapid rise in migration to destinations beyond India after the 1991 census. By 2021, the number of the absent population abroad, excluding India, had surged to 1,445,791, accounting for 66% of the total absent population. By fiscal year 2024/25, Nepalese had migrated to 151 countries for employment (DoFE, 2025). Although the Foreign Employment Act was endorsed in 1985, labour permits began to be issued only in the late 1990s, with the first record appearing in 1993/94 for 3,605 workers (MoLE, 2016). Over the 32 years from 1993/94 to 2024/25, Nepal issued 7,338,505 new labour permits, of which 1,726,188 permits were issued between 1993/94 and 2009/10; and 5,612,317 permits were issued between 2010/11 and 2024/25 (Figures 2, Figure 3).

From 1993/94 to 1996/97, foreign employment remained relatively stable, with 2,000–4,000 workers leaving the country annually. Labour permits then rose steadily from 1997/98 to 2007/08, reaching 249,051 in 2007/08 (Figure 2). The decade-long Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) was a major driver of this surge in labour migration (IOM, 2019). In 2008/09, however, labour permits dropped by 29,086 compared to the previous year.

Figure 2

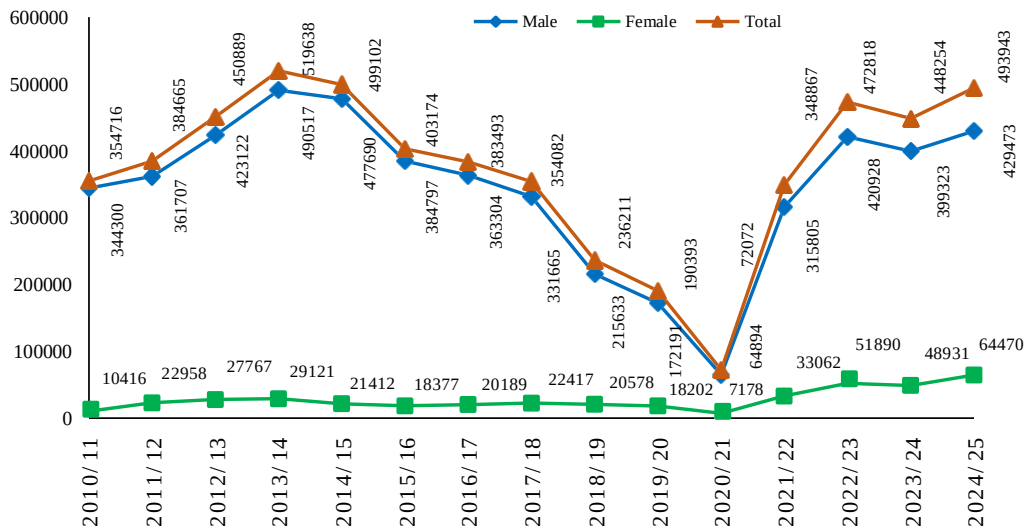
Trends in Obtaining New Labour Permits Beyond India (1993/94 – 2009/10)



Source: MoLE (2014); IOM (2019)

Figure 3

Trends in Obtaining New Labour Permits Beyond India by Sex (2010/11 – 2024/25)



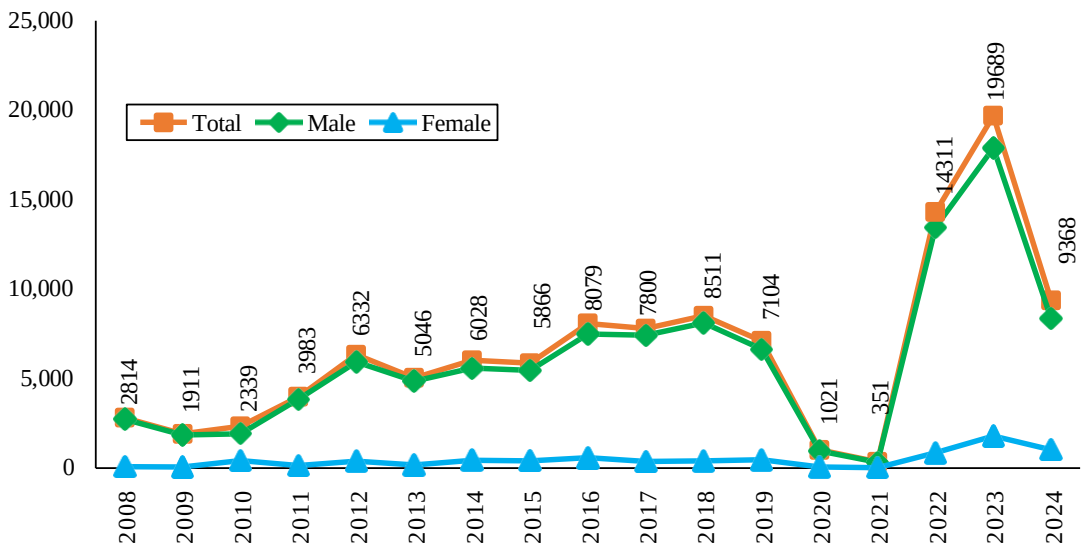
Source: MoLE (2016); MoLESS (2022); DoFE (2024, 2025)

Note: Figures 2 and 3 do not include Nepalese migrant workers employed in South Korea through the government-to-government Employment Permit System (EPS).

From 2009/10 to 2013/14, a remarkable growth trend was observed from 294,094 to reaching the highest of 519,638 persons, marking a 77% growth in only 4 years. A consistent decreasing trend is noticed from 2014/15 to 2018/19 due to the various reasons like changed policy in labour permit issues that allowed workers who returned to the same country of destination and job without issuing new permits, aftermath unsettled situation of the earthquake in April 2015, decrease in labour permits to Malaysia and banned for foreign employment in Libya and Iraq until 2017 (MoLE, 2018; MoLESS, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 severely affected the foreign employment sector from 2019/20 until 2020/21, and the decreasing trend reached an all-time low of 72,072 new labour permits in 2020/21, where merely 7,178 female labour permits were issued. After removing the travel restrictions of COVID-19 and amid high overseas labour demand, a remarkable 384% increment in the issuance of new labour permits was observed in 2021/22, reaching 348,867 from the previous fiscal year (MoLESS, 2022). Since then, the number of new labour permits issued for aspiring workers going abroad for employment has continued to rise and reached 493,943 in 2024/25 (Figure 3).

Trends in Labour Migration to the Republic of Korea through EPS

South Korea has long been a preferred destination for Nepalese migrant workers due to high wages and other economic benefits (Baniya et al., 2024). In 2004, EPS was established through a bilateral agreement, allowing Nepalese workers to go to South Korea after passing the “Test of Proficiency in Korean Language-TOPIK” test (Adhikari et al., 2023). Under EPS, 2,814 workers went in 2008, dropping to 1,911 in 2009 when the test was not held. From 2010 to 2018, gradual growth brought a total of 53,984 workers (Figure 4). COVID-19 halted the EPS-TOPIK test in 2020–21, reducing numbers to 1,021 and 351, respectively (MoLESS, 2022). The flow surged to 14,311 in 2022 and 19,689 in 2023 after COVID-19 PCR test requirements were lifted and labour quotas were increased. In 2024, entries fell to 9,368, a 52% decline, due to restrictions on production-sector test participants who attended the shipbuilding test in the same year. Between 2008 and 2024, a total of 110,553 Nepalese workers went to Korea, of which 93% are male.

Figure 4*Migration in South Korea under EPS by Sex (2008 to 2024)*

Source: MoLESS (2022); <https://www.epsnepal.org/>

Destination Countries and Regions

For the first time, the census of 1952/54 of Nepal published official numbers of the absent population, accounting for 79.4% in India, 5.1% in ASEAN countries (including 6,621 in Malaya and 1,849 in Burma), of which 20.2% did not mention their destination (Table 2). Likewise, 0.3% and 0.1% emigrated to other Asian countries, specifically 422 in China and Tibet, and 153 in Pakistan, respectively (Kansakar, 2003). The two subsequent censuses of 1961 and 1971 did not publish the absentee population. In 1981, out of the total absent population, 18,462 emigrated to other countries (4.6%), 9,054 to other Asian countries (2.3%), and 265 to China (Kansakar, 2005). Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority, 93.1% headed for India during the same census year (Table 2).

Table 2*Population Absent by Destination Country and Region (1952/54-2021)*

Census Year	India (%)	Middle East (%)	Europe (%)	ASEAN (%)	Other Asian (%)	USA & Canada (%)	Pacific Ocean Region (%)	Other Countries (%)	Not Stated (%)
1952/54	79.4			5.1 ¹	0.4 ²				20.2
1981	93.1				2.3 ³			4.6	
1991	89.2	1.0	1.0	0.8	3.0	0.3		0.1	4.6
2001	77.2	16.0 ⁴	1.6	1.3	1.1	1.3	0.4	0.3	0.8
2011	37.5	37.7	3.3	13.0	3.0	2.5	1.4	0.7	1.1
2021	34.0	36.7	5.2	9.1	5.7	4.0	4.3	0.8	0.2

Source: Kansakar (2003, 2005); CBS (2002, 2012, 2014); NSO (2023, 2025)

¹ Malaya & Burma

² China, Tibet, and Pakistan

³ Including China

⁴ Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, and Bahrain

With the introduction of the Foreign Employment Act in the early 1990s, Nepal's traditional pattern of labour migration began to shift. Increasing numbers of workers moved to the Middle East, Europe, and other Asian regions, including ASEAN countries, breaking the long-standing trend of migration primarily to India (Sharma & Thapa, 2013; Sharma et al., 2014). As shown in Table 2, the 1991 census recorded 89.2% of migrants in India, 3% in other Asian countries, 1% each in the Middle East and Europe, and 0.8% in ASEAN nations. The 2001 census revealed significant changes: the Middle East emerged as the leading destination beyond India, following Saudi Arabia (67,460), Qatar (24,379), Kuwait (3,688), UAE (12,544), and Bahrain (2,737), accounting for 16% of the absent population, while the share of migrants to India dropped by 12% compared to 1991 (MoLE, 2016).

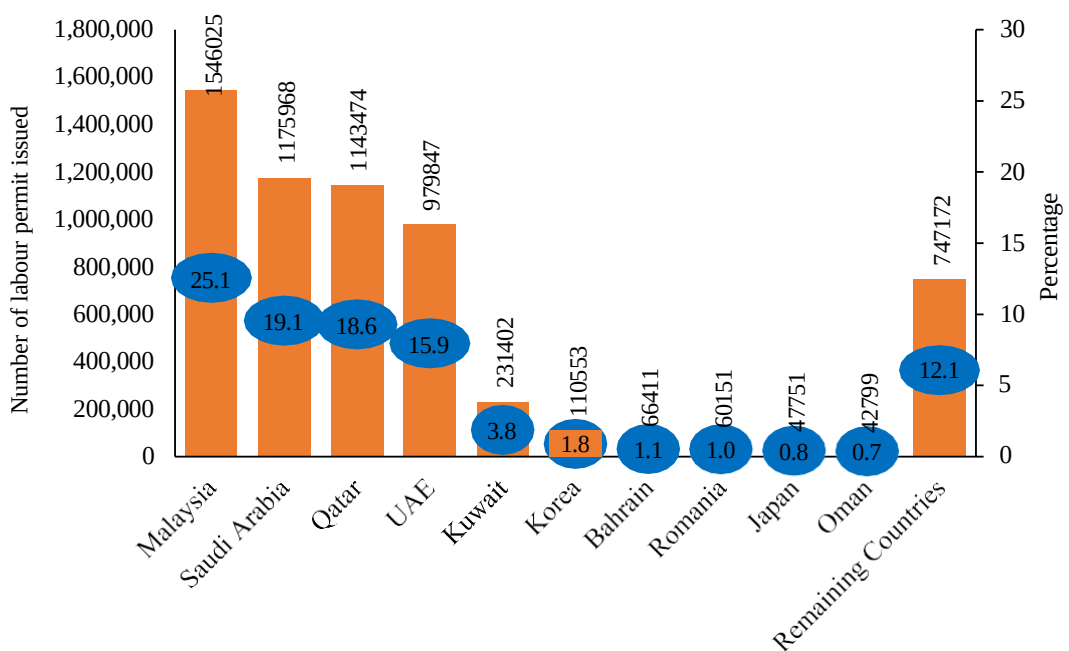
As shown in Table 2, the shift intensified in the 2011 census. The share of migrants in India dropped to 37.5%, a 40% decline from the 2001 census. Middle East countries became the top destination (37.7%), followed by ASEAN (13%), Europe (3.3%), other Asian countries (3%), and the USA & Canada (2.5%). This reflects a historic transition away from India toward the Middle East and ASEAN countries. Likewise, by the 2021 census, the Middle East remained the top destination with 36.7% of the absent population, followed by India (34%) and ASEAN countries, particularly Malaysia at 9.1% (Khatiwada, 2023). Although ASEAN's share declined by about 4%, migration to other Asian countries, Europe, the USA & Canada increased notably. Australia

and New Zealand together accounted for 4.3%, indicating the emergence of new destinations in the 2021 census (NSO, 2025).

Amongst the 151 labour destination countries, the government has established formal bilateral labour agreements mainly in the GCC region (Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, UAE) as well as with Germany, Romania, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, South Korea, Israel, Mauritius, and Japan to ensure safe, dignified, and organized migration of Nepalese workers (PFHR, 2021; MoLESS, 2022). Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and later Malaysia (after 1997) were the major destination countries of labour migrants from Nepal (MoLE, 2014). A total of 6,126,376 new labour permits were issued by DoFE in between 2008/09 to 2024/25, of which Malaysia was the most preferred destination accounting 25.1% of the total migrant workers followed by Saudi Arabia at 19.1%, Qatar at 18.6%, UAE at 15.9%, Kuwait at 3.8%, Korea at 1.8%, Bahrain at 1.1%, Romania at 1.0%, Japan at 0.8% and Oman at 0.7% (Figure 5).

Figure 5

New Labour Permit Issued for Top Ten Destination Countries (2008/09-2024/25)

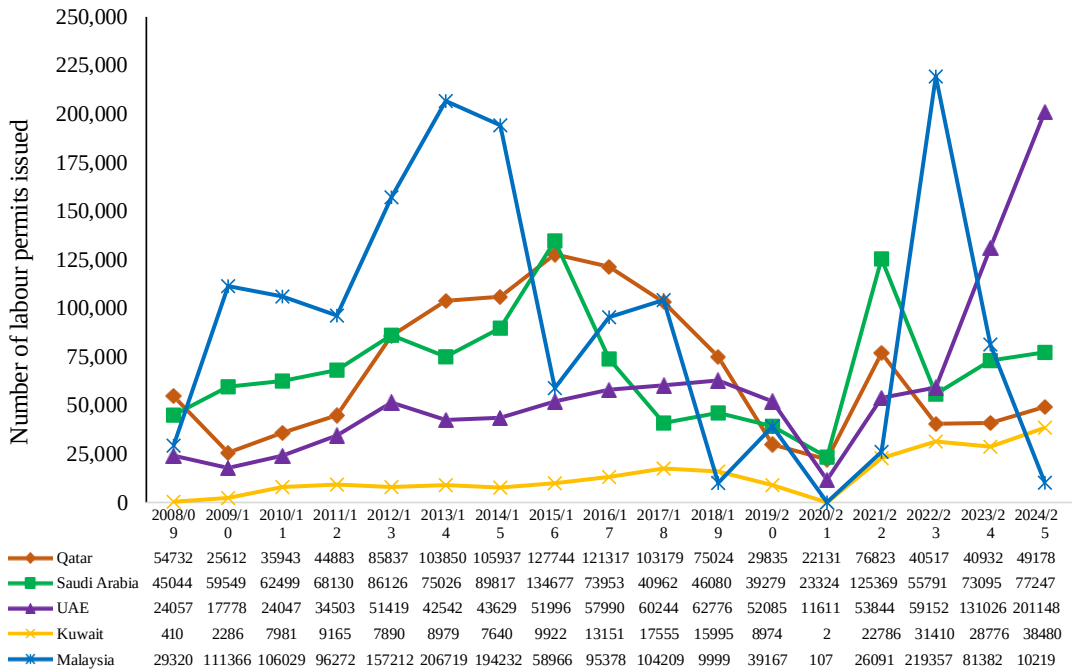


Source: MoLE (2014, 2016, 2018); MoLESS (2020, 2022); DoFE (2024, 2025)

The gender pattern of labour permits issued from 2017/18 to 2024/25 shows significant male prevalence towards Saudi Arabia at 99.2%, Malaysia at 97.3%, Korea at 92.6%, and Qatar at 92.5%. In contrast, countries like Japan (26.9%), Kuwait (21.2%), and the UAE (14.1%), along with Romania (13.1%) and Bahrain (11.6%), stand out as key destination countries of women relative to men (MoLESS, 2022; DoFE, 2024; DoFE, 2025).

Figure 6

Trends in New Labour Permits issued for the Top 5 Destination Countries (2008/09-2024/25)



Source: MoLE (2014, 2016); MoLESS (2020, 2022); DoFE (2024, 2025)

Malaysia is the largest destination, with 1,546,025 new workers from 2008/09 to 2024/25, but its trend has fluctuated sharply (Figure 6). The number of labour permits peaked at 206,719 in 2013/14 before dropping to 9,999 in 2018/19 after Malaysia temporarily restricted foreign worker recruitment in 2016 (MoLESS, 2020). A 2018 Nepal–Malaysia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) revived recruitment, raising the number to 39,167 in 2019/20. COVID-19 then halted flows, with only 107 labour permits issued in 2020/21. After restrictions eased, migration rebounded to 219,357 permits in 2022/23, but declined again the following year as Malaysia prioritized do-mestic workers affected by the pandemic (MoLESS, 2022).

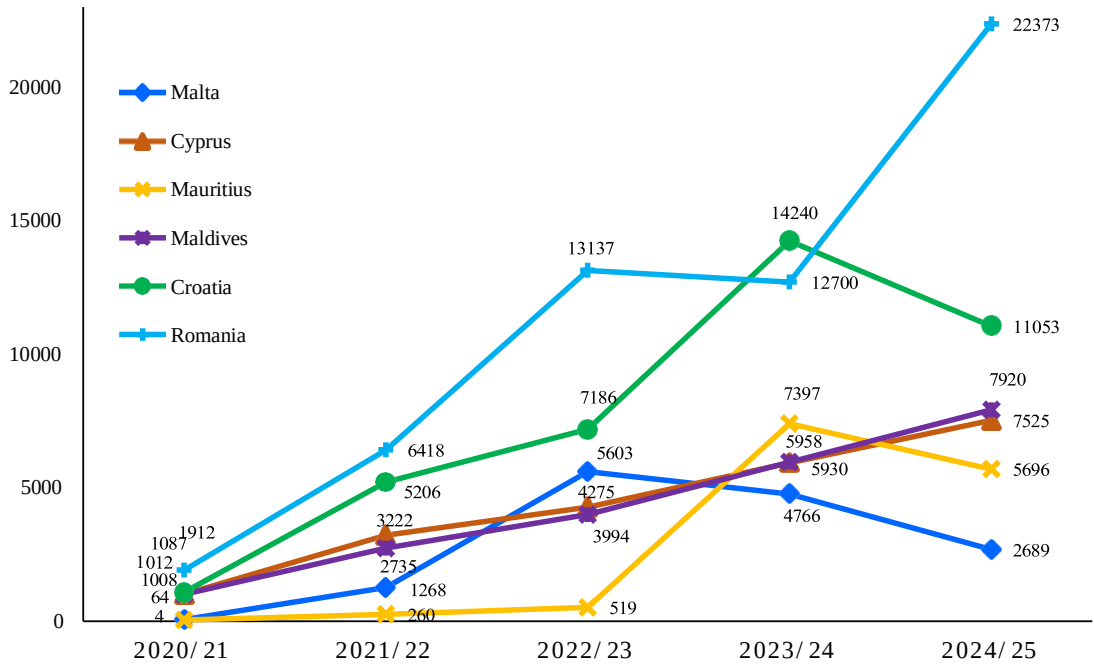
The four GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait, accounted for 57.4% of all labour permits issued between 2008/09 and 2024/25 and show broadly similar trends, though with notable differences in volume (Figure 5, Figure 6). Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the second and third largest destinations, followed comparable, steadily rising trends and reached their peak in 2015/16 with 134,677 and 127,744 workers, respectively. Their numbers then declined due to falling oil prices, nationalization policies favoring local workers, labour-permit quotas, sectoral restrictions, and broader geopolitical factors (MoLESS, 2020; Adhikari et al., 2023). COVID-19 lockdowns further reduced flows in 2020/21, dropping entries to 23,324 in Saudi Arabia and 22,131 in Qatar. In contrast, labour permits for the UAE surged sharply, reaching 131,026 in 2023/24 and a record 201,148 in the following year, driven by post-COVID infrastructure opportunities and recent increases in minimum wages for semi-skilled Nepalese workers (Khadka, 2024). Apart from the COVID-19 dip, the UAE and Kuwait show a consistently rising trend throughout 2008/09 to 2024/25.

Emerging Destinations after the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 appeared as a turning point in determining the trend and pattern of foreign labour migration in Nepal. Nearly 500,000 Nepalese workers required rescue from GCC countries and Malaysia, around 200,000 were returned from India, and many were stuck at the India-Nepal border. Moreover, 115,000 potential migrants who had already obtained labour permits were unable to depart for employment abroad due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions (IOM, 2019; Adhikari et al., 2023). Countries like Albania, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Cyprus, and Turkey from Central and Eastern Europe emerged as prominent destinations for Nepalese migrants just before the COVID-19 outbreak, and among them, Romania and Croatia took momentum once travel restrictions were removed (MoLESS, 2022).

Figure 7

Trends in New Labour Permits issued by the Top Emerging Countries of Destinations (2020/21-2024/25)



Source: MoLESS (2022); DoFE (2024, 2025)

In 2022, a new labour policy was introduced by the Government of Nepal for Central and Eastern European Countries, allowing individuals to apply for labour permits (NSO, 2025). The number of labour permits issued for Romania saw a massive 1070% growth from 1,912 to 22,373 between 2020/21 and 2024/25, making Romania a leading emerging destination post-COVID-19. Moreover, labour permits issued for Croatia increased from 1,087 to 11,053 in the same period. Cyprus and the Maldives have shown a parallel and continuous growth trend post COVID-19, receiving 21,964 and 21,615 migrants in the last 5 fiscal years, whereas a decline trend was witnessed in Malta and Mauritius in the last two fiscal years (Figure 7).

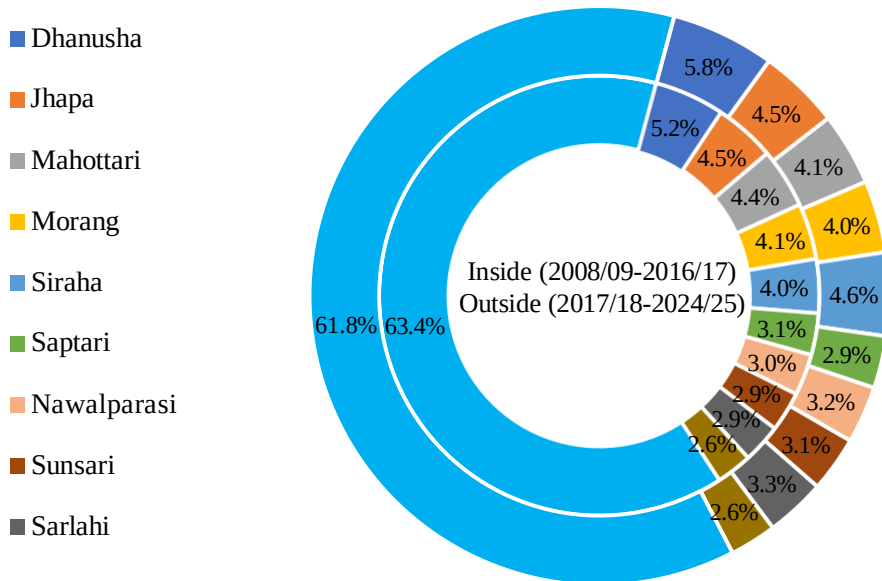
Origin Districts, Regions, and Provinces

The 1942 census of Nepal published population absent data categorized by source region. The highest number of absent population was from the Western Hill (including mountain region), totaling 71,059 persons (86.9%), followed by Eastern Hill (including

mountain region), with 81,722 persons (11.2%) of the total population abroad (Kansakar, 2003). In the 1952/54 census, Western Hill Region again had the largest number of absent population totaling 96,639 persons (48.78%), followed by Eastern Hill and Far Western Hill Regions numbering 49,553 persons (25.01%) and 43,725 persons (22.07%) respectively (Kansakar, 2005). As in the previous censuses, the 1961 census data revealed a similar pattern of the source region of absent population, where Western, Eastern, and Far Western Hill Regions hold 92.92% of the total absent population, accounting for 45.82%, 24.52% and 22.58% respectively (MoLE, 2014). The following two censuses of 1971 and 1981 did not publish data by origin districts and regions. The distribution pattern of origin regions slightly changed in the 2001 census. Despite the decreased proportion, the Western and Eastern Development Regions remain the top two migrants sending development regions, representing 43.54% and 16.0% of the total population living abroad, respectively (MoLE, 2018). However, Central Development Region emerged as the third-highest origin region, comprising 14.1%, followed closely by Far Western at 13.91% and the Mid Western Development Region at 12.43% (Khatiwada, 2014).

Figure 8

Top-ten origin districts of labour migrants (2008/09 - 2024/25)



Source: MoLE (2018); MoLESS (2020 and 2022); DoFE (2024, 2025)

Note: After the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, Nawalparasi District was divided into two separate districts named Nawalparasi East and Nawalparasi West. From 2021/22, the Department of Foreign Employment started issuing labour permits for Nawalparasi East and Nawalparasi West District separately. However, labour permit data issued for both separated districts were combined and analyzed for this study as a former Nawalparasi District.

As shown in Figure 8, Dhanusha (5.2%), Jhapa (4.5%), Mahottari (4.4%), Morang (4.1%), and Siraha (4.0%) were the top five labour origin districts, respectively, from 2008/09 to 2016/17, accounting for more than one-fifth of total migrants. Siraha (4.6%) emerged as the third-highest labour origin district following Dhanusha (5.8%) and Jhapa (4.5%) from 2017/18–2024/25. If we analyze the ranking of origin districts from 2008/09 to 2024/25, Dhanusha and Jhapa consistently held the top two labour sending districts representing Madhesh and Koshi Province, respectively. Jhapa constantly stands among the top 10 female origin districts, followed by Sindhupalchok, Morang, Makwanpur, Kavrepalanchok, Ilam, Nuwakot, Sunsari, and Chitwan. In contrast, the southern terai districts of Madhesh Provinces are ranked as the top origin districts of males seeking employment abroad (MoLESS, 2020; MoLESS, 2022). Districts from Karnali and Sudurpaschim Province share a low number of foreign labour migrants due to the prevailing trend of high emigration to India from these provinces, which remains undocumented (IOM, 2023).

Conclusion

Three major streams define Nepal's 200-year history of international labour migration: to India (before 1990), to Gulf States and Malaysia (1990–2020), and the emerging post-COVID shift toward developed countries, especially in East Asia and Central/Eastern Europe. Until 1990, foreign employment was concentrated in India, though data from various studies and government sources show inconsistencies. Enactment of the Foreign Employment Act and Economic liberalization after 1990 sharply reduced migration to India, as reflected in the 2001 census, marking a first major shift toward GCC countries and Malaysia. Despite this decline, India still accounted for 34% (744,801 individuals) of the absent population in the 2021 census of Nepal, while migration beyond India rose to 1,445,791, representing 66% of the total.

Since 1993/94, Nepal has issued over 7.3 million new labour permits, with 5.6 million issued after 2010/11. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Malaysia (after 1997) have been the main destinations, receiving over 82% of migrant workers, followed by Korea and Bahrain. Higher labour wages in the European countries and government

provision enabling individuals to obtain labour permits by themselves have attracted Nepali workers to destinations such as Romania, Croatia, the Maldives, and Cyprus, showing another significant post-COVID-19 shift toward emerging labour markets. GCC countries, Malaysia, and Korea continue to attract mostly male workers, while Japan, Cyprus, Romania, Croatia, and Malta are emerging as preferred destinations for female migrants. Despite discrepancies between absent-population data and labour-permit records, both sources reveal similar trends and shifts in the international labour migration pattern.

The origin areas of migrants have shifted from the Western Hills (1942–1961) to the Southern Terai (2008–2025), specifically the Madhesh and Koshi Provinces. While districts like Dhanusha and Jhapa now lead in formal labor exports, significant undocumented migration to India persists from the Karnali and Sudurpaschim regions.

From theoretical perspectives, both push and pull factors consistently shape Nepal's foreign employment trends. Key push factors include poverty, limited economic opportunities, the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), political instability, and the 2015 earthquake. In contrast, the Gulf economic boom, higher wages abroad, and new employment opportunities after the COVID-19 pandemic act as strong pull factors. However, migration flows are often disrupted by intervening obstacles such as policy changes in origin and destination countries; Nepal's bans on migration to Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan; destination countries' preference for local workers during economic crises, and COVID-19-related restrictions. From a migration system theory standpoint, these trends and patterns of labor migration are also significantly influenced by bilateral labor agreements, primarily directing flows toward GCC countries and Malaysia before COVID-19, and increasingly toward Eastern European countries in the post-pandemic period.

Various migration streams and multiple social, physical, economic, and political factors have shaped Nepal's migration patterns, revealing several unique cases over the past 200 years. Hence, further research using diverse theoretical perspectives is needed for a deeper understanding of international labour migration in Nepal. The study also highlights major discrepancies between census data on the absent population and the labour permits issued by DoFE. From a policy standpoint, it underscores the need for accurate data and better regulation of migration occurring without formal labour approvals, especially through India and informal channels. The paper also recommends updating FEIMS to include data on Nepal–India labour migration, multiple permits issued to the same individuals, and returnee migrants.

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