Book Review

Sharma, Jeevan R. 2018. 
*Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 190 pp. $69.50 (hardcover); $69.50 (e-book).

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Traditional studies of migration frequently focus on economic motivations that lead individuals to choose to migrate, assuming the migrant is a rational actor with control over destiny through choice. From this perspective, there is little space to explore the influence of sociocultural forces—such as gender and gendered expectations—on decisions surrounding and experiences of migration. Additionally, until recently, the study of masculinity in South Asia has been somewhat neglected. Sharma addresses these gaps in *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration, and Masculinities in Nepal.* Through an examination of the migration of young men from the western rural hill region of Nepal to urban centers in India, Sharma illustrates how the act of leaving village life, crossing the border, and working in India impact these men’s identities and masculinity.

To examine the gendered experience of migration among young men in Nepal, Sharma conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Palpa (a rural western region of Nepal), Mumbai, and Delhi between 2004 and 2013, interviewing villagers, migrants, and outreach workers at an organization aimed at reducing HIV transmission among Nepali migrants and their sexual partners. To further understand the migration experience, Sharma crossed the border in Mahendranagar with three young men by *tanga* (horse-drawn carriage) and across the twelve-kilometer border zone. Sharma argues migration has become a rite of passage for many young poor men of rural Nepal, which shapes and is shaped by their understandings of what it means to be a man. Economic hardship, combined with a desire for freedom from rural life and to access urban modernity, is a key factor in contemporary young Nepali men’s decisions to migrate. But, Sharma stresses there is also a long history of men traveling abroad for employment. Historically, working abroad provided rural Nepali men with income and respect. Thus, migration has come to be viewed
as a means of both elevating a man’s reputation in the community and providing as well as occupying the masculine “provider” role for one’s family.

Despite the elevated social and gendered significance of migration, Sharma finds the process of migration from rural Nepal to urban cities in India emasculating. The very act of crossing the border is humiliating as migrants face interrogation, ill-treatment, and extortion. Once in India, men encounter further emasculation when struggling to find work often forced into positions in restaurants, hotels, or domestic spheres requiring labor they were raised to expect women to do. Those who are able to secure more desirable positions (e.g., as a security guard) frequently find the work initially difficult and lonely. Regardless of position, the majority of Nepali men live in slum housing where rooms are congested and poorly maintained, oftentimes lacking basic amenities. Health problems are common, but access to health care is not always available as public health discourse regularly frames Nepali migrants as carriers of sexually transmitted infections and disregard their overall well-being and other social determinants of health.

Sharma finds the humiliation of migration, combined with the emasculation of marginalized work and constrained living situation, creates a docile migrant workforce. But it is produced by undermining Nepali migrant men’s gendered sense of self-worth. Thus, young migrant workers are forced to reframe their understanding of masculinity, often through the consumption of “modern goods and experiences.” Migrants go sightseeing, host small gatherings with food and alcohol, meet at beer bars, purchase mobile phones, watch television, and attend the new releases of movies. Working across the border allows these men to consume goods, images, and experiences that provide them with new ideas about masculinity as they are forced to renegotiate their own understandings.

Through an exploration of life in rural Nepal, the history of migration in Nepal, and how young Nepali men come to leave village life, cross the border, and engage in work and life abroad, Sharma examines the gendered dynamics of border crossing from the rural villages of Nepal to the urban cities of India. One of the strengths of this book is Sharma’s ability to illustrate how this process shapes the identities of young Nepali migrants and their understandings of masculinity. Each chapter digs deeper into how this process impacts young rural Nepali men’s gendered lives.

*Crossing the Border to India* is an important contribution to the scholarship on migration, development, and masculinities. Sharma provides a new perspective for understanding the complex relationship between immigration, work, and gender. This text will appeal to a broad range of scholars across multiple disciplines as well as nonacademic readers interested in the ways interact with our understanding and expression of gender.