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In the Shadow of Zanskar: The Life of a Nepali Migrant

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This article is a tribute to Thinle, a Nepali worker who died last September (2008) in Chilling. He was a driller working on the construction of the road between Nimu and Padum, along the Zanskar River. Like most other similar stories, the story of Thinle could have remained undocumented, mainly because migrants' presence in Ladakh remains widely unstudied.

The story of Thinle has a lot to tell about the living conditions of migrants who build the roads in Ladakh, their relationship to the environment – physical and imagined – and their relationship to danger. Starting from the biography of a man and his family, I attempt to understand the larger social matrix in which this history is embedded. Using the concept of *structural violence* (Galtung 1969; Farmer 1997; 2004) I try to shed light on the wider socio-political forces at work in this tragedy. At the same time I point to a striking reality: despite the long and important presence of working migrants in Ladakh, they remain unstudied. In spite of their substantial contribution to Ladakh's history and development, both literally and figuratively, in the field and in the literature, migrants remain at the margin, or *in the shade*.

The life of Thinle Sherpa

I started researching road construction and road workers in Ladakh about three years ago. Thinle was one of the workers I learnt to know while I was conducting fieldwork in Chilling. Thinle and his family were very engaging people, and those who met them will surely remember them. Every worker's story is unique, and I could have chosen to tell another one. But Thinle's story and the tragic circumstances of his death are quite representative of other working migrants' situation and experience. It is also quite informative of the wider socio-political forces at stake. What follows is what Thinle and his family shared with me.

Thinle was born around 1967 in a village called Kiangsing, near Pangarpu in the district of Sindhupalchok in Nepal. He was a Sherpa, and grew up close to the border with Tibet. He started working far away from home to supplement the household's income at the age of 15, when he left to sell garments in the streets of Bombay and in Karnataka. He came back after four long years and married Zangmo.

He was not allowed to leave home just after the wedding and started rearing cattle with up to 15 cows. During these years, Thinle and Zangmo had four daughters. Thinle also sometimes worked in the wood business with Tibet, reinvesting his income in cows. Yet his business became unprofitable, he started experiencing losses and in 1998 he decided to leave again, alone, to work in Bombay for the garments business. When he came back after a few months he

bought 50 goats, but a disease killed most of them and he only managed to sell 10 of them. Furthermore, the political situation in Nepal was grim as the country was in the middle of a civil war. The national and local economy was deteriorating further. Thinle and his family lived with the fear of forced enrolment by the Maoists and had to face exactions from both Maoists and government forces, as both asked the villagers for support while suspecting villagers to help the enemy.

In 2003, like many others, Thinle and Zangmo decided to leave Nepal with their two oldest daughters and their fifth and newly born daughter Passang Dolma. The third and fourth daughters stayed with relatives back home. They started their long journey in Himachal Pradesh. Thinle went back to Bombay for three months but this time he could not earn enough to support his family, so he decided to try his luck in Manali. He and Zangmo worked there for a road contractor. Yet, as it often happens to migrants they were not paid. They heard that working conditions in Ladakh were better, so they decided to leave again. They worked in Stok, building walls and canals, but once again they were not paid the full amount that was due to them. From there they went to Skalzangling where Thinle worked as a mason. This is where Zangmo gave birth to their sixth child and only son: Tashi. And whereas their economic situation had been deteriorating for years, and further since they had left Nepal, for the first time it started improving.

From Skalzangling they moved to Shey where they found work in stone breaking: a “very hard work”, as he later told me (28.06.2007). They moved to Kargil in 2005 to work in road construction for a private contractor, and there Thinle and Zangmo married their oldest daughter to a relative. When they heard about working opportunities for the army in Batalik they moved there, and Thinle started carrying food rations from the main army camp to advanced posts. The work was well paid, but he had to work at night, carrying heavy loads in the snow, and most of all he was the only breadwinner there. So once again, they decided to leave.

The arrival in Chilling

In October 2006 Thinle and his family reached Chilling. Some relatives were already working there, and he had heard about working opportunities with *FRO* (*Frontier Roads Organisation*) on the road being built in Chilling. This is how he recalled his arrival in Chilling when I first met him (in 21.04.2007):

The officer recruited us for that purpose [drilling]. We didn't want to, we were scared, but the officer said there is no vacancy for road maintenance and embankments, there is only vacancy for drilling. We had heard about the deaths, which we talked about before. The officer didn't tell me about the deaths. Because of the deaths in August the drilling had stopped, until December. So because of that they told me they would give me employment as a driller. This is my first job as a driller.

I came here, and I heard from people who had been working here for a longer time that right at that place people had died. And for the first three

days I was really scared. Nobody was working there at that time. From December to April we've received more money than what people normally get for drilling: Rs. 3,900 per month, instead of 3,200. This is more than what you get elsewhere.

(...) For the first few days I was really scared, we had heard that Guru Rinpoche resides in the mountain, he got angry and this is why people are dying. So I went to see people living here and asked them which god resided here, what do you believe? They said this is Guru Rinpoche. I am a Buddhist too so I don't believe Guru Rinpoche would want to kill people. If this is Guru Rinpoche I don't believe he could harm anybody. Before we came, people here got *lamas* to do prayers, and *lamas* said now this is a safe place you can work here, the gods won't harm you.

That is how Thinle and his family started living and working on the road near Chilling. Until June 2007, Thinle, Zangmo, and three of their children – Mingmar, Passang Dolma and the little Tashi – shared a concrete shelter with another Nepali family next to the trolley over the river, on the upper side of the road. Their oldest daughter and her husband lived and worked in a restaurant in Nimu. In 2007 Thinle's family along with about twelve other families were relocated to a campsite opposite the place where the Markha River flows into the Zaskar River, where the new trolley now stands. The new camp was closer to the construction site, but unlike villages there is no stream nearby: the water had to be brought by trucks.

Also, unlike Chilling or other villages in Ladakh that are situated in areas receiving a large amount of sun in summer and in winter, both areas where road builders lived were in the shade of high peaks and ridges most of the day, barely receiving two hours of sun in the middle of January. If the temperature inside the tents was close to tropical in summer, it dived far below zero during winter as the icy Zaskar wind blew along the river, penetrating the numerous tears and holes in the tents. When I asked an inhabitant of the camp in spring where the hens I had seen the previous autumn had gone, she told me she had to eat them as they had frozen overnight. And indeed, once the small *bokari* had stopped producing its heat and smoke the temperature became arctic; I remember staying awake and shivering the whole night in Thinle's tent. In the early morning drillers left to build the road, severely underequipped, making small bonfires in order to get warm in the shade of the cold vertical walls that dominate the river, a thin dark blue ribbon partly covered with ice and snow at that time of the year. It was so cold that diesel oil was freezing and fuel tanks and engines had to be heated in the flame of a stove placed underneath the tipper before the engines could be started.

Thinle and his family worked on the construction site for nearly two years: Thinle as a driller, and his wife Zangmo as a *chokadar*, keeping the camp during the day and checking passage on the dirt track during the night to avoid people stealing road-building material. Mingmar – the second daughter – was also working on the road, mixing cement and building walls. Zangmo also distilled rice *chang* and *raksi*¹ over the fire during the day and sold it to the

¹ Beer and distilled alcohol made of fermented rice.

workers who stopped at the camp during or after work. Nepali, Jharkhandi, Bihari, Bengali, Punjabi: the whole of India was represented there, “united in diversity”. Sometimes she also cooked for them. Along with the three wages paid by the *Frontier Roads Organisation*, Thinle and his family managed to make a living and to save money.

Costs of living are high for migrants on the road: they do not have access to government rations and most of the income is spent on food and fuel for heating – wood and kerosene. Because costs of living are quite high, many workers do not manage to save much beyond what is required for their subsistence and that of their family. Sometimes men came to drink and eat and some left the camp without paying their debts. Yet Thinle and his family were among the few who were doing well. It was the first time in his life Thinle managed to save so much – around 10 to 12,000 rupees a month, on the average, mostly thanks to the selling of *raksi* and *chang*. They even had plans for their future back home in Kiangsing, as the situation in Nepal was improving. They still had a bit of land there and were sending money back home to build a house. They were planning to buy sheep and goats and to restart the cattle business. Zangmo even talked one day of buying a car – more or less seriously since there is no road to their village. Their daughter Mingmar was happy with these plans, as her dream was to go back to Nepal (26.06.2007): “I don’t like working on roads. My dream is to become a goat keeper in Nepal. My dad told me we’re leaving next year in October (2008). I’m looking forward.”

Death and danger

Of course building the road in Chilling was dangerous. Danger was obvious to anybody visiting the area. Still, many workers were willing to take risks. Here at least they were not cheated and payments came regularly. I first went to Chilling after the big accident that claimed the life of four workers during the month of August 2006. This is an extract of my field notes (15.09.2006):

The first thing they told us in the morning was that they had stopped working at the end of the road because of the accident that had happened there in August. Some road builders were working closer to the village, but even there the danger was palpable. The site was impressive, with these massive four to eight hundred meters high slopes, cliffs and hanging rocks dominating the light brown river of Zanskar. And somewhere fifty meters above the river there was this thin road carved into the slope, following the contours, with tiny humans working at falling rocks, picking up stones, digging with picks and shovels, loading a truck, preparing cement and building walls, and the drown of one or two bulldozers in the background.

Above and below the road, rocks were falling, lifting up storms of dust behind them, and in some places workers, wearing symbolic helmets were intermittently watching up for rocks falling from these high, unstable and steep slopes. This is probably what struck me the most: these people looking up when working, as if to emphasize that here the danger comes from above. Even when not working and when danger was out of sight, workers were still watching up, just as a reflex incorporated into their pool of gestures necessary to evolve in this world and on which survival

ultimately depended, as if to signify that for the time they would spend here the threat of death would constantly be floating above them.

When I arrived I immediately felt a sense of danger, trying not to stop to those places that seemed the most unsafe to me, and also watching above. My heart was beating fast, and from time to time, when I was listening to them, I was happy to be able to hide my feelings behind my dark sunglasses. This feeling was even more extreme in places where nobody was working, as this silence and loneliness on an unfinished dirt road gave you the impression that the place had been deserted. There had been life, but there wasn't anymore, as if the workers had been forced to flee by overwhelming circumstances, living an impression of last frontier and defining the geographical limits of life. Workers were trying to extend this frontier further; and this hostile, almighty and deadly environment was firing back at them, forcing them into retreat.

Yet, what was fascinating was how workers – especially drillers – managed to deal with danger on a daily basis. They could not avoid it, so they seemed to be taming it, often with the help of their gods. I once asked Thinle (21.04.2006):

- Are you less afraid now?

- Everybody prays to his gods in the morning, there is a small temple up there. We pray to our own gods.

- How is the work compared to what you expected?

- It's ok. The only fear is that we may die. Otherwise the work is not difficult. It's better than the other jobs I have done in Ladakh.“

In May 2007, after a blast, Thinle and the others went back to drilling. A whole section of the mountain collapsed, killing one of the drillers – Shanta – and injuring another. On the same morning, Shanta had told Thinle he wanted to quit this place and go back to Delhi for a safer job, even if for a lower pay. When the accident happened Thinle was standing just next to Shanta, but he was not hurt. When we talked about it, Thinle was trying to understand: “Why him and not me? He also respected the gods. Perhaps he didn't believe sincerely...”

If drillers were the most at risk, danger was also affecting other workers and family member, although in a different way. After the accident of May 2007 “safety measures” were adopted. Somebody would look after the drillers and blow a whistle if blocks started falling. The measure seemed illusory because of the noise of the drill that covered the whistle. Mingmar became the “whistle blower” while her father was drilling: “Work is easy. I just have to carry the water and blow the whistle”. But “drilling is dangerous, I fear for my father. Stones can fall at any time”. Zangmo too feared for Thinle. At 5 pm, in what had become like a ceremonial, Zangmo and her neighbour were waiting outside the shelter, scanning the end of the road, anxiously waiting for the truck that would bring their husbands, sons and daughters back to the camp.

The last time I saw Thinle and his family was in January 2008, before leaving Chilling for Leh in the back of a tipper with two Bihari workers freezing to death in their cotton trousers, acrylic socks in plastic flip-flops and tore woollen gloves. I wished I would meet Thinle some day when they would be back to

Nepal, and visit them in *their* place. Unfortunately that will not happen. About a week ago I received a message from a friend in Leh. She was just coming back from Chilling, carrying the bad news: Thinle had died in a blasting accident in September in Chilling.

The wider story

The story of Thinle and his family is unique, but some of its features are not, and are likely to be common to many road workers' stories in Ladakh and elsewhere. There are probably many Thinle and Zangmo whose story remains undocumented, living *in the shadow* of Ladakhi history and development. I could also have used the story of Nima Dorje, who disappeared a few months earlier, or Shanta, or Doma, or one of the four workers who died in the summer of 2006. These stories would also have unveiled "some of the mechanisms through which large-scale social forces crystallize into the sharp, hard surfaces of individual suffering" (Farmer 1997: 263).

Structural violence was first used by Galtung to differentiate it from *personal violence*. *Structural violence* is violence that no person is committing, but that is "built into structure" (1969: 171). Similarly to Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, it is both "structured and structuring", or "*stricturing*" in Farmer's own words (2004: 315). Closed to a situation of social injustice, *structural violence* does not deny migrants agency, but it certainly curbs it and makes some people more at risk of suffering and death than others.

In the story of Thinle, several factors may help us understand the conditions that drove them on roads, helped them accept working as drillers and bear intolerable risks and ultimately led to a tragic ending. Among the political, social and economic forces that structure risk, none has explanatory power on its own. It is rather the cumulative and simultaneous effect of these forces that may help us understand road workers situation, their willingness to bear risks and *structural violence*.

The first factor mentioned in Thinle's story was the situation in Nepal, and the long history of labour out-migration. Estimations on the number of Nepali working in India vary between 250,000 and one million (Seddon, Adhikari et al. 2002). The situation was further exacerbated by the civil conflict, which drove many people who faced exactions and could not make a living in Nepal out of the country. This was a common feature in stories of other Nepali migrants in Chilling.

A second factor that aggravated the situation of Thinle was the precariousness of work. From the moment they left Nepal in 2003, Thinle and his family went to work in eight different locations in less than five years. Often, work was temporary, and once work was finished they had to look for another source of income². Also, in two of these locations they were cheated and were not paid

² In a way working for BRO was also precarious: in 2005, due to a shortage of funds the construction stopped in Chilling and workers were laid off.

the full amount. This was a factor that led many migrants to work for *FRO*, where at least they received their full wage on a monthly basis.

A third factor that mattered was the limited amount of bargaining power Thinle had. When he came to Chilling with his family, Thinle needed to work. He did not want to drill, but that was the only job he was offered. He was scared, but he had little choice. Most drillers were in a similar position: they were travelling with their family, had limited resources and needed to work. This helped them accept short term contracts (6 months contracts that could be terminated unilaterally at any time) and dangerous jobs.

A fourth factor was the high costs of living they were facing while living on the road, and in Ladakh generally. As migrants did not have access to rations at subsidized rates, they had to bear heavy costs for food and heating (wood and kerosene oil). With three salaries and an extra income from the sale of *chang*, *raksi* and meals, Thinle's family did not have to face exorbitant costs of living and managed to save (although they sometimes incurred losses due to customers who did not pay for their debts). Yet, for many road workers *costs of reproduction of work* (in the Marxian acceptance) were often a problematic issue. Moreover, the meagre savings were often dilapidated in health related expenses, sometimes in gambling and drinking, or they were used to pay for the living expense of family members back home. Those who managed to save often did not do so from a single wage, but could only save because they were cumulating wages, selling *chang*, *raksi* or shop items, or because they were involved in corruption networks or were very skilled at playing cards. This may also explain why many who wanted to quit the job stayed longer, as they were earning more than in most other jobs they could find.

Finally, a fifth and decisive factor was the dangerousness of the task itself, and the widespread view that in road construction in difficult terrain casualties are unavoidable.³ As a supervisor working on the road once put it (15.09.2006): "because it [the road] is for defence, it has to be completed. For every worker who dies, *FRO* will recruit 50 others." Hence casualties were seen as a price to pay, and it seemed that some people had to be sacrificed for the road. This factor was further aggravated by the necessity to build the road in the allocated time. Construction was lagging behind the targets set and the road had to be built quickly. As a result workers had to start drilling soon after the explosion while rocks were still unstable, walls were not cleaned properly, and illusory protective measures like the whistle were adopted.

An accumulation of social, economic and political forces – that are all at some point the result of human agency – at different stages in time and space in their migration journey may help us understand what drove them to work there, and what contributed to make conditions as dangerous as they were. Thinle and his family were certainly not devoid of agency – and I think their story demonstrated it – but their agency was curbed at many turns. They may have

³ See Tan-Pei-Ying (1945) on the Burma road; Ispahani (1989) on the Karakoram highway; or as expressed on BRO's website: "Let us not forget that roads in this difficult terrain have been built not only with mere cement and concrete, but also with the blood of men of the Border Roads Organisation of India"

found the forces they were facing powerful and constraining, and it is likely that their faith in gods helped them accept these constraints and to feel protected.

Migrant workers in Ladakh

It may have appeared in the story of Thinle that migrant workers live and work *in the shade*. This is true literally in Chilling, as road workers constantly evolve in the shade of the Zanskar gorge. But this is also true figuratively, as ecologically and economically speaking, migrants fill in the less desirable “niches”. Road construction is one of them.⁴ Yet, despite being agents and builders of Ladakhi development, building roads that are not for them, migrants are largely absent from local histories and consciousnesses.

When I was in Padum I tried to investigate about the “big snow” (*Ka chenmo*) of 1987, which closed the Pensi La in early autumn and claimed the life of many migrants, many of whom had come to work on roads (see Crowden 1996). Most people who were in Padum at that time did not remember: “Nobody died. We don’t have stories like that” was among the usual answers (18.08.2007). I finally found one person who remembered: “Nobody died... but many people died, Nepali, over the Shingo La, the Jumlam” (18.08.2007). Similarly, most deaths that happen on the road are not recorded, so that after some time they remain a vague memory. Unlike officers it is very unlikely that road workers ever get a commemorative plate. In Chilling, nobody knows the exact number of casualties. Figures circulate, transmitted from worker to worker, but figures are never confirmed.

In Ladakh, stories about migrant road workers are sometimes heard. People often fear them. The first time I encountered some road workers evolving in a black cloud of burning tar on the Leh-Manali road, they were presented to me as “criminals and convicts sentenced to road building”, as if one has to be criminal to deserve such a fate. I once heard the story of Bihari road workers who had stolen and eaten more than 150 goats. Another story concerns the passengers of a bus who were thrown burning tar at them by angry Bihari road workers. Sometimes the same story happened in Nimu, sometimes in Nubra, generally far from home so that in the end no one knows whether it really happened. Migrants are absent from histories, or when they are remembered they are more likely to be perpetrators of crimes rather than victims. This is not surprising since *personal violence* is often recorded and documented. By comparison *structural violence* is silent: “structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the [thin] air around us” (Galtung 1969: 173).

Figuratively, in scholarly research too migrants are *in the shade* of Ladakh. The presence of migrants and foreign traders in Ladakh has long been mentioned. In

⁴ With the exception of a gang of Ladakhi workers in Nimu and two Ladakhi *chokadar* in Zangla, in all construction sites I have visited, all road workers were migrants, Nepali and Jharkhandi for the majority of them. Note that it was not the case for major roads built in the past such as the Srinagar-Leh road or the road to Padum. Historically, it is interesting to note the presence of Ladakhi road builders in Punjab and what is now Himachal Pradesh, during the second half of the 19th century (Rizvi 2005).

his extremely crude and contemptuous colonial language, Knight describes his arrival in Leh bazaar as “a sudden burst (...) into civilisation”, further extrapolating on “the savage Tartars in sheepskins, and other outlandish men, [who] jostle with the elegant Hindoo merchant from the cities of Central India, and the turbulent Mussulman Pathan [who] scowls at the imperturbable idolaters from the Celestial Empire” (1893: 177-8), most of which were traders. A century later, any visitor to Leh, Khaltse or Padum may probably notice how multicultural these places are, bustling with people from different horizons involved in all kinds of trade: Kashmiri traders and bakers, Punjabi cooks in *dhabas*; gangs of Bihari agricultural coolies, sometimes standing at the informal labour markets at the *chowk* in Leh bazaar; Himachali hairdressers; Nepali involved in construction, hotels and restaurants; “shoeshine boys” from Jaipur; beggars; road workers; soldiers from all over India; without forgetting hordes of Indian and foreign tourists. In almost every village of Ladakh including the most remote ones “non-natives” work as coolies in the fields and construct schools, roads and community halls.

Bray mentions in *Ladakh Histories* how Urdu, Hindi, English, Ladakhi, Tibetan, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Nepali and mother tongues of many visitors are to be heard in Ladakh (2005). Van Beek and Pirie also write “[t]he days when one could imagine Ladakh as having a single culture, economy, ecology and political system are long gone”, pointing to the complexities of Ladakh societies and environment (2008: 8). Ladakh is not a homogenous whole. Earlier Aggarwal also called for an anthropology of Ladakh that would rightly grasp this complexity and freed itself from the “prison-like modes of thought which academic territorialism and imagination have defined and concretised”, in which “inhabitants or ‘natives’ living in these areas are then ‘incarcerated’ and quarantined” (1993: 21-2). Yet, one is forced to observe that except for western missionaries and explorers, and except for a few remarkable studies in which working migrants are mentioned (Crowden 1996: 57; Aggarwal 2004: 82-83), populations other than “native” Ladakhis remain widely unresearched, and the wide complexity mentioned above widely unexplored. In other words, if this complexity is to be grasped there is a need to document the different groups of people that are part of the Ladakhi *ethnoscape* (Appadurai 1996).

Therefore there seems to be a sad coherence between the place of migrants in Ladakh, and their place in the literature on Ladakh. In both cases migrants are absent. The story of Thinle showed how migrants active in road construction live and work literally in the shade of Zanskar. It also exemplified the concept of *structural violence*, and helped us understand the many forces at work in constraining migrants’ agency and driving them onto the roads of Ladakh. Migrants are also figuratively *in the shade* of Ladakh in the sense that they contribute to the building and transformation of “modern Ladakh” but are absent from its history. Finally they are largely absent from the scholarly literature on Ladakh. In a way, their physical absence in the landscape, in people’s consciousness, and in the literature seem to be linked: as Farmer (1997: 280) rightly writes “the poor are not only more likely to suffer, they are also more likely to have their suffering silenced.”

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