



Manpower Recruitment Agencies in Nepal

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Abstract

The daily exodus of an increasing number of Nepali to many foreign nations has a significant economic influence on the country. It is not a new phenomenon in Nepal for people to migrate outside to seek work. Still, it is a relatively new practice in Nepal to facilitate overseas migration through employment agencies. Nepal's liberal democratic atmosphere, openness, and the nationwide spread of the Maoist insurgency contributed to a dramatic rise in transnational movements in the country midway through the 2000s. Over this period, there was a notable increase in the number of Nepalis using brokering agencies and their agents to help them migrate out of Nepal, mostly to non-traditional locations in India. Moving further from mere focusing on the impact of international migration on migrants and their family members, this article discusses the distinguishing features and nature of recruitment agencies that facilitate the worldwide migration of foreign workers from Nepal. This article is based on research that looked at companies that help workers migrate outside of Nepal through migrant recruiting. Since these groups are a part of global networks that assist individuals traveling across borders, their actions have made it simpler to turn Nepal into commodities on the global market stage. To gain an understanding of the nuances of the topic and to derive meaning from the raw data, the study relied mainly on primary and ethnographic data that were subsequently processed thematically.

Keywords: brokering, international migration, manpower recruitment agency, Nepal, typologies

Introduction

The social, economic, and demographic ramifications of international migration have become deeply ingrained in Nepali society. In the 2021 census, 21,90,592 men and women from 15,55,961 households were documented as residing outside the country. As reported by CBS (2021), this amounted to 7.511% (approx.) of the entire population. If all unofficial migrants and migrants to India are taken into account, the number might increase. Transnational migration-related beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are becoming commonplace in people's daily lives. Men and women who choose to remain in their homeland often compare, contrast, and relate to others who opt to migrate in search of employment or further education. For instance, we may come across advertisements for vocational training in a daily newspaper, urging readers to enroll in the program in order to earn in Nepal an equivalent amount of money to those who travel abroad, or we could come across a number of news

articles detailing the various occupations of returning migrants in Nepal or their income in comparison to their overseas employment.

The phenomenon of migration and mobility in the quest for work is not new to Nepali society. The first wave of migration started in the 18th and 19th centuries, when hill peasants were compelled to leave their land due to government regulations and changes in agriculture and to seek employment elsewhere within the nation or abroad (Regmi, 1999). Emigration for labour has been a common experience for many men and women in nearly every region of the nation, beginning with recruiting for the army of Sikh monarch Ranjit Singh and continuing with the British army in India (Seddon et al., 2001). Driven by harsh economic circumstances in their native land, hill people have traditionally depended on the relatively robust economy of their southern neighbor, where many relocate in pursuit of better job prospects. Comparing Maoist insurgency and natural disasters with worldwide migration, Gurung (2004) has also depicted it as a phenomenon that has been shaped by these powerful forces.

Since 1990, when Nepal established a liberal democratic political system, the government of Nepal has eased restrictions regarding its citizens' ability to work abroad. The worldwide upsurge of free economic policies has additionally made it possible for Nepali people to work throughout the world. A vast array of manpower recruitment agencies (MRAs) have been established because of the Maoist insurgency's escalation in the country and the ensuing rise in the number of individuals seeking employment abroad. Together with the boost in the number of MRAs, their economic function and relevance have also risen.

In Nepal, the 'second wave of migration' started in the mid-1980s, accelerated in the 1990s and dramatically increased in the mid-2000s, when the Maoist insurgency spread throughout Nepal. This was the period when increasing numbers of Nepalis began to use brokering agencies and agents to facilitate their migration out of Nepal especially beyond the traditional destinations in India. The Foreign Employment Act (1985) opened the overseas employment market to private recruiters (known as 'manpower agencies' in Nepal) who act as 'migrant brokers (Lindquist, 2015) who facilitate the process of migration. By early 2000, the number of agencies operating in Nepal to recruit and send Nepali men and women abroad, Middle East and Southeast Asia, increased drastically. This period saw a strident increase in the migration of men and women to various destinations in search of work. Currently, there are 860 manpower recruitment private agencies active in Nepal (MoLESS, 2022) involved in facilitating overseas employment. Moreover, there are around 500 registered agents and many other undocumented of them are also involved in this middle space (Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015). Every single day, these types of brokering agencies play a critical role in facilitating the migration of a large number of men and women from Nepal.

Transnational migration is not a smooth process as the migrants have to leave their national boundary and move to new areas and socio-cultural contexts. This makes the migrants seek support to facilitate the migration process. Scholars have produced wider knowledge of the significance of social networks for acquiring emotional and financial support in the destination land (Phillimore et al., 2014; Ryan, 2023). Some research scholarship has also shown the significance of 'arrival infrastructures' which consists of varieties of places like religious sites, civil society organizations, and informal sites like barbers and cafes that facilitate their arrival in the destination land. This idea broadly embraces

the ‘soft infrastructures’ (Boost and Oosterlynck, 2019) or ‘migrant infrastructures’ (Hall et al., 2017) comprising individual actors and social networks which can support arrival.

It is obvious that all aspirant migrants do not have access to such soft infrastructures, or they may need more support than the available through such informal mechanisms. This provides space for the existence of brokering agencies and “facilitating migration for work can be a win-win proposition” (IOM, 2013) for both the agency and the migrants. These days, taking support from these agencies has become a universal phenomenon in the emigration process. Nevertheless, we still have little knowledge in this area and this paper aims to contribute through the empirical data of the typical context of Nepal. From her covert research in UK about the Chinese immigrants, Pai (2004) found that some of the brokering agents are also involved in “status manufacturing”, which means producing and selling passports. This article shows the acts of MRAs in facilitating the international migration process and their implications for the migrants.

Research questions and objectives

The overall objective of this paper is to draw the map of nature and the key aspects of recruitment agencies that ‘facilitate’ international migration, exclusively the migration for foreign employment from Nepal. The study which gave the foundation for the creation of this paper was undertaken for a more thorough comprehension of the operational procedures of these manpower agencies. It precisely seeks to get answers to the following analytical queries:

- What are the key characteristics of brokering agencies and agents? Are there any distinctions among them?
- How and why do prospective immigrants select brokering firms? and
- What personnel, networks, and techniques do these manpower agencies employ to draw in prospective migrants?

Research design and methods

This essay is based on research that was conducted about migrant recruiting firms, which facilitate the exodus of workers from Nepal. These organizations are part of international networks that support cross-border human mobility, and they also facilitate Nepal is becomes transnational commodities. The study mostly used primary and ethnographic data to understand the subtleties of this field.

I have carried out ethnographic fieldwork in separate locations in Kathmandu to gain insight into how these employment agencies function. The main methods used to gather data from the field locations in the areas of Dilli Bazaar, Baneshwor, Gongabu, and Koteshwor were conversation and observation. Interviews took place with those who ran or worked at "manpower recruitment agencies" as well as with "potential migrants" who were attempting to migrate abroad in search of jobs. The researcher toured many employment agencies in Kathmandu over several days as part of the ethnographic field research, and he also attended employment fairs and seminars. Furthermore, this type of engagement included meetings with prospective migrants in front of or outside of recruitment agencies.

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher also observed the recruitment agency environment, the relationships between agency staff and their customers, and how prospective migrants develop and construct their identities through their interactions with recruiting agencies and with one another. The researcher discussed various aspects of international migration with office bearers of the associations, prospective migrants, visiting clients, and concerned individuals at the MRAs. The researcher also

talked with a few migrants who now live overseas after consulting employment companies. The study reviewed previously published records, data, and media articles on employment agencies alongside to source data. The primary and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Furthermore, the investigator conducted a content analysis of the information obtained from different secondary sources.

Varieties of manpower recruitment agencies

The fact that MRAs only deploy a range of workers to different destinations is one of their main features. These migrants frequently move to nations like Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and the Gulf States, where there is a great need for manpower. These migrants primarily find employment in manual labor, semi-skilled labor, and a small amount of skilled work. Some other agencies send people for training, internships, or jobs. They export individuals to the US, Australia, Japan, Europe, and other places where skilled laborers can find employment. In my conversation with recruitment agency personnel and prospective migrants, it is known that the latter are invited to "enter" as students, workshop participants, and trainees as part of their facilitation. Even though it is against the current law of the land, once they enter the destination country, they will stay there.

Considering the growing significance of this middle space of migration (Kern and Müller-Böcker, 2015) between Nepali workers and employers abroad, it justifies the existence of MRAs. In line with that, it is important to remember what a public relations officer at an MRA in Maharjgunj assumes about the shared advantages for MRAs and migrant workers in catering to their needs. These uneducated migrants from rural areas require the support of agencies because they are unable to travel internationally on their own accord. MRAs are profiting handsomely from these foreign immigrants. At times, some agency workers feel apologetic that these people lack jobs in their home country and need to go elsewhere. Nonetheless, these MRAs take comfort in helping the country create jobs for its people and expand its foreign exchange earnings stream. They believe that these migratory laborers, who are leaving their homes and families behind, are the bedrock of the national economy.

Based on a few basic characteristics of their business, the type of work they do, how they identify possible migrants, and the nations to which they transfer their employees, these agencies can be categorized into multiple types. With some instances of negative practices and fraudulent cases, these recruiters play crucial roles in supporting international mobility and setting up the groundwork for labor migration (Paoletti et al., 2014). They also help to create connections by tying people and places together.

With the criterion of where their labor supply is going, MRAs can be divided into two categories. Some of these agencies send the workers only to specific destinations like Macau, Singapore and Kuwait. It is found that certain destinations are also associated with the type of tasks for which the workers are sent, e.g. ex-army/police and sometimes even civilians are sent to Macau as security guards only. There aren't many MRAs involved in this type of job. However, a majority of the organizations export diverse kinds of labor to different regions of the globe. The majority of the current generation of migrants is relocating abroad, largely to Portugal, South Korea, Romania, and Japan (Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2002). Although there are large proportions of low-skilled employees, these workers have a variety of specializations and skills.

How the agencies hire and transfer people abroad is an additional variable in their classification. Some agencies assist in sending workers overseas by adopting the traditional approach of hiring workers

directly from the agencies. In addition to hiring them directly, several other agencies use intermediaries to discover and recruit employees. The increase in foreign employment and the growth of brokerage firms have compelled MRAs to explore migrant laborers with the agents' assistance (Paoletti et al., 2014). Their agents are dispersed across the nation or have networks in different parts of it. These agents serve as a point of contact for prospective clients of the MRAs. Instead of receiving a set pay, these agents receive commissions from the fees that each immigrant pays. These brokers help find prospective employees while raising the brokerage fees and revenue for MRAs.

We have found that individual agents are helpful in supporting us to find potential migrants.

To gain people's trust as well as to know more about the prospective ones, we look for locally reputed, influential and knowledgeable persons such as teachers, local political leaders or businessman having good image in the locality (A manpower agency operator from Bagbazaar area)

As narrated by the owner of this MRA from Bagbazaar area, to attract and reassure a large number of prospective migrants, MRAs employ agents or enlist their help. Those with local experience, such as proprietors of small businesses and employees of other private enterprises, are chosen for the brokering. Returnee migrants occasionally serve as agents for the same MRA that sent them overseas. In my conversation with representative from different manpower agencies, it is known that these mediators receive some of the money that migrants pay to the MRA, which can vary from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000, in exchange for helping to recruit emigrants. Naturally, the cost associated with global migration rises when intermediaries are involved in the hiring process for migrant labor. A few Nepali agencies function as the international MRAs' agents. These foreign agencies, which are registered and functional in the Gulf destination nations, handle the sending of workers overseas. Individuals from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other South Asian nations frequently own such agencies there.

Functioning of manpower recruitment agencies

Often, prospective migrants come to the MRA directly. To attract them, signboards are put up at the front door or in other noticeable places in their office building. Also, advertisements in the newspaper about the work usually show how many people find their way to the agencies. These days, MRAs are required to post job opening notices in their daily papers. The name, address, and phone number of the employer or company, approval from the Department of Foreign Employment, the sort and amount of open positions, the duration of the contract, the required paperwork to be submitted, the monthly salary, food, shelter, and other benefits, as well as the fees that migrants need to pay to the recruitment agency, comprise the majority of the important information that should be included in the advertisement.

An additional means of hiring workers is individual connections. Prospective immigrants can find job openings through acquaintances, relatives, or other members of their family. The people involved may be returnee migrants, residents of urban areas with newspaper access, or those with further linkages to MRAs. At times, they are the individuals who work for the MRAs as agents. According to Grannovetter (1985:500), MRAs were dependent on their grasp of the value of social relationships' embeddedness in improving market processes to grow their businesses. The underlying presumptions of the embeddedness method, as Lie (1997) states, are that institutions and economic ties are sustained by social networks based on kinship, friendship, trust, or goodwill. The following narrative of Mr. Komal Chhetri from Tanahu, 27, in 2019, shows how potential migrants reach a particular MRA.

I went to Qatar about ten years ago to work as a driver. With the expiration of my visa I returned to Nepal after three years. Considering the level of income, I was still interested in going to another country, UAE, for another term. While in Qatar, I had learnt from a friend of mine that MRAs can send their own people for better earning job, Therefore, I am here in Koteswar at an MRA where my *Bhandai*, father's sister's son, works. I am sure I can stay there for a full term with every facility they have offered for the job.

The prospective immigrant may contact the relevant MRAs as soon as they are aware of the job opening. Interested immigrants pick the kind of career they want to have after contacting the agency for foreign employment. The next step for the candidate is to submit the required paperwork to the agency concerned. These documents include a passport, citizenship certificate, evidence of knowledge and skills, and medical records. They must present the medical certificate issued by the designated, approved medical examination facilities. Every prospective immigrant I spoke with felt that a sizable amount of this medical charge went toward the same MRA as a commission.

The MRAs aid prospective immigrants by preparing the necessary paperwork, setting up the appointment with a representative of the employment agency for the final interview, assisting with the processing of visas and finding them jobs abroad. To get hired, the immigrant has to demonstrate to the employer's representative during the final interview that they are competent in doing the work. A typical migrant screening procedure has been shown by the instance of Manoj and others at an MRA.

I went to The Rising Moon (fictitious name), an MRA's office premise, in Kalanki on December 19, 2019. Nine applicants for a trip to Qatar were present for interviews, as I could see. Inside the compound was a brand-new Hyundai automobile. Multiple job advertisements for various Gulf countries could be seen on a notice board located at the office door. One of the applicants guided me in the direction of the position he was trying for while the others were going through the notice board. The advertisements offered details on pay and other perks (ranging from QR 900 to QR 1800), as well as working days and hours (eight hours a day, six days a week, with Friday being a holiday). Every notification, which was written in English, included detailed information in Nepali regarding the candidates' eligibility.

The newspaper advertisement informed most prospective migrants who visited The Rising Moon then about the available jobs. The advertisement for a job was for a position in Doha, Qatar. The firm representative had been booked to conduct the last interview. He had travelled to the Morang district the day before for an analogous sort of hiring interview and landed in Kathmandu early on December 19. His hectic regimen and the fact that he was departing for Qatar this afternoon at 2:00 p.m. were both known to the prospective employees. Standing outside the compound, next to his motorcycle, was one of The Rising Moon's agents. Six to seven other possible employees were dispersed across the street.

The interview process took place on the second floor of the office. The candidates were waiting for their turn. On their turn, they get a call from agency officials. Three of the potential employees were sitting clumsily on the floor while they were waiting for their turn or for their friends to leave the interview room. None of the candidates take a seat on the bench outside the office, which would accommodate four or five people.

I spoke with Manoj Sunuwar, a prospective immigrant from Dhankuta in eastern Nepal, who is approximately twenty-five years old. He had almost four years of employment experience in the Gulf. He had worked as a woodworker in Qatar for three years before returning to Nepal once his visa

expired. Upon his return, he got married and now he has a small son. He returned to Dubai for a three-year employment at Tai Sui Co. He joined a group of about 15,000 employees in this organization. Mr. Sunuwar and the other 1,500 Nepali employees of the company were forced to return home when the company dissolved a few of its places in Dubai due to the consequences of the worldwide fiscal crisis. He has purchased a plot of land in the plain region of Jhapa with the money he earned from these two trips, where he intends to someday migrate and stay. Returning the loan that he took out to purchase the plot of property will require him to travel overseas this time.

He found the business's amenities and working atmosphere to be decent. The corporation fed and housed its employees for free, gave them an apple a day, and the weather in Dubai was much better than in Qatar. He used to live in a shared area with other workers from Nepal. He has nothing but admiration for the Nepali team.

He was attempting to travel to Qatar this time to work as a carpenter. It was stated that the position would yield only QR 1100. Considering his work history and being categorized as a "Quarter returnee," he stated during the interview that he was worth QR 1650. The business representative made him an offer of QR 1150 and gave him some time to consider it. He was summoned inside after 30 minutes, at which point the business representative offered a second offer of QR 1300. At last, he requested 1450 QR. On this occasion, the corporate agent informed Manoj that he was unable to provide any additional support and instead asked for some time to reconsider. Between these periods of contemplation and reconsideration, I met Manoj. He anticipated receiving a call from the company representative offering him the amount he had requested. He went into the office to find out why he hadn't been called in 30 minutes. Upon his return, he informed me that the official from the company had not raised the compensation. He was adamant that it was not worth it to go there for QR 1300 alone because there were no meals available. The representative's Indian nationality made it simpler for him to strike up a conversation and, consequently, to ask for a better wage. In addition, he considers that "it would not have been easier if it were in a foreign land," but "in his own country he is free to express his ideas and wishes."

Potential migrants who are already acquainted with working overseas all agree that it is preferable to travel straight to the employer rather than via the agency of the destination country. A direct applicant will not have to shuffle between companies, and his employment security will be certain. Many individuals who were travelling overseas for the first time were not informed of this and were unable to anticipate it. Their realization will not come until they find themselves stranded in an unfamiliar country with no way out. When an immigrant worker goes via the destination country's agency, they are required to work for several companies at the agency's "request". The agency will not repeatedly send employees to the same employer. Manoj speculates that the rationale for this could be that they are reluctant to allow employees to establish close relationships with their employers, worrying that that company might recruit the employee directly and take away the Agency's revenue share.

Discussions: expanding globalization, flourishing agencies

International trade, investment, and population movement have increased due to globalization. Although dependency (Frank, 1969) and world system (Wallerstein, 1974) theories have addressed the flow of capital and goods extensively, they offered little consideration to the international migration of people. However, because of providing cheaper labor for global capitalism, migration across borders

has grown to be an important aspect of globalization. Transnational labor migration had a significant negative impact on Nepal's domestic production cycle by draining its productive human resources. To secure labor supply contracts, a substantial portion of the money made by the MRAs from the labor migrants in Nepal goes back to the destination nation Qatar via unofficial, illegal channels in Nepal (Endo and Afram, 2011).

Conversely, apart from the remittances that individual migrants earn, international migration has had a significant role in boosting economic activity. International migration is the reason for the success of many kinds of enterprises. Remittance firms, cyber, photocopy, clinics, banks, finance, transportation, hotels, lodges, small cafés, taxis, and translation services/consultants are a few examples to consider while observing the large number of prospective migrants visiting these service providers. Moreover, we can see that such stores and small-scale business outlets are available in the neighborhood of MRAs' offices. The owners and workers in these outlets state that one of the main categories of their clients are people trying to go abroad. Several airlines have begun operating flights from Nepal to areas where many Nepali people work. To aid in the process of foreign migration, there are 223 licensed medical check-up centers (DoFE, 2023a) and 143 orientation training centers (DoFE, 2023b).

To sway their clientele, MRAs frequently carefully choose where their offices are situated. The agency's office location has an enormous impact on their business. As most of their clientele travel from outside the Kathmandu valley and enter through and around the ring road, agencies are dispersed across the ring road areas. The positioning of their corporate recruitment offices in the city and the rural area base of prospective employees they have also serves as a symbolic means of drawing resources from the rural areas and sending them to the city (Breeding, 2017). Amidst this situation, over the last decade, in my conversations with the officials of these MRAs, it is known that they have opened new branches in several cities, primarily in Nepalgunj, Pokhara, Narayangadh/Bharatpur, Biratnagar, and so on.

Recruitment organizations in the global South operate as agencies of the employer in the North to promote and expand their competitive edge in the global capitalistic system. These agencies facilitate access to inexpensive labor and respite from the current labor laws, which do not provide equal benefits to international workers, for both businesses and the destination countries. The global economic system spreads over the world's outskirts in this fashion, frequently using labor surpluses. These agencies' creation and institutionalization have made it easier to gather cheap labor and resources and then transfer surpluses to the capitalist center.

The higher charges paid for migration elevate the stress of the migrants and additionally leave them indebted even before they depart, making their savings impossible (Kharel et al., 2023). It can be argued that the vast operational costs of MRAs, the numerous layers of intermediaries involved in the recruitment process, informal payment of recruitment agencies and civil servants engaged in the recruitment process, and other factors have made Nepal's "free visa, free ticket" migration policy ineffective in lowering the cost of international immigration.

Conclusions

While the lucrative job market abroad is drawing migrant workers from Nepal, the unfavorable living and employment conditions in the nation compel them to search for other job marketplaces. In the framework of traditional migration methods and the help of friends and family, workforce recruiting

companies are a recent phenomenon. A new trend of foreign employment with brokering charges was sparked by MRAs' introduction into the transnational migration scene. It is accurately stated by Kern and Müller-Böker (2015) that for many Nepali migrants, especially those from low educational backgrounds and limited information access, these recruitment brokers are not only a better option for overseas employment, but often the only one that is practical. With the increasing demand and roles of MRAs, many MRAs are being established these days and some of them are expanding their branches in different parts of the country in addition to taking the help of agents in recruiting potential migrants.

Acknowledging the inextricable link between social ties and the commercial process, MRAs look after their business by hiring agents from the network of prospective migrants. This essay was created using data from ethnographic research done in Nepal, the migratory population's home country, and the recruitment firms that served them. I have felt that it is also imperative to conduct multi-sited fieldwork including the destination locations, for a comprehensive understanding of the problems related to transnational migration, particularly in regards to understanding the functioning mechanisms of MRAs and how they impact the lives of Nepali migrants.

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