

# **‘We are in the process’: The exploitation of hope and the political economy of waiting among the aspiring irregular migrants in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

‘We are in the process’ was the phrase used by my Nepali interlocutors, soon-to-be migrants, who were waiting for their departure abroad for months on end. Based on conversations with irregular migrants, this paper explores the relationship between time and power, focusing on the political economy of waiting. It suggests that making people wait has become a key technique of governmentality used by the migration industry actors to control aspiring migrants’ movement, exploit their desires and hopes, and extract surplus value, turning the migration industry in Nepal into a major system of profiteering. Forcing aspiring migrants to wait in a state of suspense (not boredom) for departures that are imminent but not certain, unscrupulous brokers create an affective state in suspended subjects, which allows those in power to prey on migrants’ vulnerability and their hope for a better life, pushing many of the aspiring migrants into grave debt.

## **Keywords**

Brokers, debt, irregular migration, hope, Nepal, suspense, human smuggling, waiting

## **Introduction: ‘In the process’**

‘We are in the process’ (*hami processma chau*) was the phrase often used by my Nepali interlocutors, soon to be migrants, who were waiting for their departure abroad, often to the Gulf States and, more recently, to the so-called big countries: the USA, Japan, Canada, and any of the EU states. ‘Being in the process’, i.e. essentially being stuck in a limbo state, could take anywhere from several months, when one was going to the Gulf or Malaysia, to several

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years, when one embarked on an irregular perilous journey via the South American route to the USA. Waiting for an ‘imminent departure’, as Chu puts it in her work on irregular Chinese migrants to the USA (2010), could take up to a year. In more extreme cases, it could take up to four years of unsuccessful attempts to get a visa, find reliable brokers, start a year-long journey through multiple transit countries, spanning several continents, in some cases only to be deported to Nepal to start all over again.

In Nepal, the phrase ‘we are in the process’ is used to refer not only to the migration experiences, but a whole range of processes. Waiting has become an endemic part of everyday life for many young people in Nepal: waiting for citizenship certificate in district offices, for connections to provide jobs, for government licenses to secure lucrative contracts, for parents to arrange marriage, for older politicians to retire. Yet, despite the ubiquitous experience of waiting, especially among young people and when it comes to dealing with bureaucracy, the waiting described in this paper is quite distinct.

While many of my interlocutors in Nepal talked about living in the waiting (*waitingma basne*), their waiting was not that of boredom – a dominant trope characterizing much of the literature on waiting (Jeffrey, 2010; Masquelier, 2013; Schielke, 2008) – but rather that of suspense. Instead of killing time or suffering from boredom, aspiring irregular migrants in Nepal eagerly anticipated the departure abroad that was by no means certain until the very last moment. Most of the time, they did not know how long they would have to wait for the departure nor whether they would depart at all.

‘Let you not be a fool throughout 2073. I became one last year’, read the April Fool’s Facebook post by Suresh. A returned migrant from South Korea, Suresh was fooled by a broker who promised to take him to Canada after a payment of thousands of dollars. Suresh never made it to Canada not because something wrong happened along the dangerous route, but rather because the broker-cum-smuggler never intended to take Suresh to the final destination. Using the phrase of Piot (2010: 82), Suresh became a victim of ‘fraud within fraud’: what was sold as an irregular journey to Canada was in fact just a scam, aimed at extracting money from aspiring migrants ready to entrust thousands of dollars to brokers upfront.

After having spent more than six months waiting for his departure to India, what was supposed to be the first point of the journey, Suresh never set his feet further than a hotel in Mumbai. At the time of our meeting in Kathmandu, Suresh was trying to get back 4650 USD that he had given to the smuggler. 4,650 USD was a miniscule sum in comparison with nearly 15,000 USD that 10 of his fellow-travellers paid in order to reach Canada. Suresh’s group consisted of 23 people, 10 of whom paid 15,000 USD, 2 people paid 12,000 USD, and 11 people paid 4,650 USD. All that money was essentially for a fake visa, sent to them by Viber. The economy of scale developed by the broker was quite impressive: recruiting 23 people, making one fake visa and earning 225,150 USD of cash.

Over the last couple of years, sham migration schemes in Nepal were on the rise – the schemes that purposefully made aspiring irregular migrants wait, kept them in a state of suspense and anxiety, raising their aspirations, only to reap off as much profit as possible in a newly emerging economy of scale.<sup>1</sup> In such a situation, waiting acquired a new quality: it became expensive on the one hand and exhausting on the other. Not only did the aspiring migrants exhaust their household resources but also their peace of mind. They had to take extra-ordinary amounts of debt, in some cases reaching up to 60,000 USD to pay exorbitant fees to the brokers for the ‘imminent departures’. The capitalist dictum that time is money acquired quite a literal sense under conditions when many of the aspiring irregular migrants borrowed money at a 36% or 50% annual interest rate. While waiting became costly for aspiring migrants caught in a cycle of uncertainty, it became profitable for brokers,

moneylenders and the like, who could exploit the hope of young men for a better life, their readiness to take extraordinary risks to realize their dreams of living in a ‘big country’ and their lack of knowledge of the migration process.

## **The political economy of waiting: Time, money and power**

Waiting has been termed a ubiquitous condition of modernity (Bayart, 2007; Janeja and Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010). While many people are caught in a state of waitthood, recent anthropological and sociological studies have shown that it is not distributed equally. It has become a ‘privilege’ of the downtrodden, of the precariat, and those excluded from consumer modernity. As shown by Van den Berg and O’Neill (2017), because of the ubiquity of waiting in different contexts around the world (Elliot, 2016; Khosravi, 2017; Mains, 2017; Masquelier, 2013), one should go beyond the focus on the experiential dimension of waiting and politicize the ubiquitous experience of boredom among certain classes as a symptom of the malaise of advanced capitalism – the key theme of the current edited issue. Instead of being the domain exclusively of the rich, as was often the case in 19th century Europe and which it remains now, boredom has also become a predicament of those who are denied the chance of being exploited in late capitalism (Berlant, 2011) and are thus doomed to social death, with overabundance of time being one of its quintessential signs.

Rather than exploring the experiential dimension of waiting (Ralph, 2008; Schielke, 2008) or the texture of its everydayness, this article explores the political economy of waiting in the context of irregular migration in Nepal. Drawing on Bourdieu (2000), I focus on the relationship between time and power, suggesting that making people wait has become one of the key techniques of governmentality and profit-making not only within the context of international migration in Nepal, but also globally. According to Bourdieu (2000: 228),

Absolute power is the power to make oneself unpredictable and deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in total uncertainty by offering no scope to their capacity to predict ... The all powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait.

In this article, I look at waiting, which has little to do with boredom, but everything to do with suspense – an extreme sense of uncertainty, anticipation and a strong desire to achieve a dream, with migrants having little means to affect the final outcome. By making people wait while keeping their hopes alive, unscrupulous brokers in Nepal make aspiring irregular migrants vulnerable and pliable to the extent that the latter are ready to take risks and join the schemes that they would have been much more cautious about, should they have not been subjected to prolonged periods of waiting in a state of suspense (after having paid huge sums of money upfront). Following Smuts (2008: 284–285), I use suspense in a very particular sense: as a state when people can do very little to achieve a strong desire and are powerless to affect the outcome, which appears to be imminent. In other words, uncertainty or mystery is not enough for creating suspense for, as Smuts cogently explains, however many times the viewer watches a suspense film, s/he feels suspense, because of the powerlessness to affect an outcome, i.e. warn, help, work towards the goal (hence, he argues, narratives are often more suspenseful than real life) (Smuts, 2008).

While much of the literature on the temporal control of migration explored the role of the border control agencies or asylum systems in using waiting as a technique of controlling people’s lives (Andersson 2014b; Griffiths, 2017; Haas, 2017; McNevin and Missbach, 2018), I focus on techniques used by unscrupulous brokers, a term that I will use throughout the paper. I argue that unscrupulous brokers constitute a distinct case of migration

intermediaries who, instead of facilitating the journey of migrants, make it difficult: they make the time of departure uncertain, prepare various ‘settings’ on route to pause migrants and extract money from migrants, or, in worse-case scenarios, simply arrange a sham scheme that involves no departure at all. As this article demonstrates further, the master-minds of the suspense – unscrupulous brokers (*dadal*)<sup>2</sup> – often know the course of the events, but purposefully conceal it from migrants in order to create extreme levels of uncertainty and anxiety while keeping migrants’ hope alive, thus depriving them of agency.

The paradox is that the higher the price irregular migrants pay for the long-cherished journey, the more willing they are to surrender to any demands of unscrupulous brokers and the less power they wield over their own destiny. In such a scenario, time works against the migrants, but for the benefit of the brokers. Once irregular migrants have handed over huge sums of money, often before even starting the journey, they simply have no choice but follow the whims of the brokers – the point, which the brokers understand all too well and use waiting as one of the key technologies to deprive migrants of agency while keeping their hope and desires alive.

Far from being unique, unscrupulous brokers are just one among many migration industry actors who use waiting as a technique of governmentality on the one hand and profit-making on the other (Bulman and Gibbs, 2019). As shown by critical migration scholars (Andersson 2014b; Griffiths, 2014; Turnbull, 2016), the temporal control of migration or ‘usurpation’ of migrants’ time is a technique used not only by brokers, but also by the government and immigration control agencies all over the world. While at first sight the temporal dimension of controlling migration appears to be all about reducing or redirecting migrant flows, as shown by Anderson (2014a), it is also linked with the creation of a multibillion industry of controlling borders, with illegality becoming not so much a problem to be solved but rather a source of profit to be reaped. Issuing visas through expedient and slow tracks, i.e. through making some people wait longer than others, and outsourcing state bureaucratic work to brokers has become a multibillion industry from which governments in the North are making profits (for UK see Bulman and Gibbs, 2019; Marsh, 2018). So the fact that irregular migration in Nepal has become a source of capital accumulation on unprecedented scale, with the shadow economies and remittance-dependent economy directly benefiting those in power, is nothing new in a world where irregular migration, despite all the passion it generates, has become a new source of capital accumulation both in the Global North and South. One could argue that waiting in suspense or hopeful waiting has become both a form of labour and a state of affect, which renders whole groups of people vulnerable to exploitation in late capitalism, where profit is no longer made through the exploitation of labour alone, but also through emotions, hopes, desires and life itself (see Andersson, 2018).

## Nepal as a nation of migration

With 27% of its GDP made up by remittances and with 1500 migrants leaving Nepal on a daily basis (World Bank, 2018), Nepal can be called a nation of migration. However, what is interesting is not only the sheer quantity of international migrants in Nepal or the volume of remittances, but rather the reconfiguration of the state: it is becoming increasingly dependent not only on remittances but also on the operation of the migration industry. Constituted not only by the formally registered manpower agencies, airport officials and local-level brokers (Coburn, 2018: 79), but also by the money-lenders and banks who provide loans for prospective migrants; the hotels that cater to rural migrants coming to Kathmandu to meet brokers and get a passport; doctors who issue medical certificates

for migrants going to the Gulf; education consultancies that often cover up the operation of human smugglers taking people to the USA;<sup>3</sup> police who attempt to capture unscrupulous brokers; politicians, some of whom act as smugglers-in-law; dons who are hired to settle accounts with unscrupulous brokers when all other methods have been exhausted – the migration industry in Nepal has penetrated most areas of social, political and economic life. There are also private boarding schools that function on the fees paid from remittances, Japanese and Korean language courses, which train young people for their dream destinations, and the Gurkha training centres, which train hundreds of young people to become soldiers in the UK or Indian Armies. In short, the migration industry in Nepal is a lucrative and thriving enterprise, a total enterprise in other words.

Over the last decade, the culture of migration in Nepal has become so pervasive that going abroad is no longer considered as one of the livelihood options: it is considered as the only tenable option for young people and has in fact become a norm (Maycock, 2017; Sharma, 2013; Sijapati, 2015; Yamanaka, 2000). While the history of Nepali labourers working outside the country is certainly not new, the previous generations of Nepalis migrated mostly to India, which, in the local lore, is not conceived of as going abroad (*bidesh*) at all, or joined the Indian or British Gurkha regiments (for the migration history see, Sharma, 2018: 53–80). According to official sources, as of 2014 India still accounted for 37% of migration from Nepal, but the Middle Eastern countries and Malaysia accounted for 37% and 13%, respectively, with EU countries, Japan and the USA coming into the picture as well (Sharma et al., 2014: 40). The pattern of the migration has radically changed in many rural communities, with the younger generation of Nepalis, whose fathers laboured in India, refusing to follow in their fathers' footsteps.

While going to the 'big countries' is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has rapidly spread in Nepal over the last couple of years. No longer content with work in the Gulf, often under slave-like conditions (see Bruslé, 2012), young people started 'dreaming big', following the example of a handful of young people who made it to the USA through irregular channels. Not being able to rely on manpower agencies, young people have to rely on irregular brokers-cum-smugglers. The lucky ones could draw on pre-existing chain migration networks, but, to my knowledge, this was the case only in one village where the history of migration to the USA spans more than 10 years, which is extremely rare for the hilly remote areas of the country.

While this paper is based on fieldwork among a distinct ethnic group, the Kham Magars, and in different localities – a village in the Rukum and Rolpa districts, a bazaar town in the Terai region, Kathmandu and a series of interviews with irregular migrants in different localities in the USA – it is clear that the trend described in this article was gaining momentum across many villages in the Himalayas at the time of fieldwork. Yet it has not been covered in the literature on migration in Nepal. While the snow-ball technique used during fieldwork poses a serious question as to the scale of the described phenomenon especially in relation to the real-world smuggling, I suggest that what is described below was just a tip of the ice-berg: each of the research participants was part of the group of 10–20 people. My research participants preferred to keep their stories of failed journeys hidden: I was able to interview them only because of networks of trust built over a long period of repeated fieldwork in that part of Nepal.

Imagine a village high in the Nepali Himalayas (Rukum district), where I did fieldwork in the spring of 2017, still not properly connected by roads to the rest of the country. Sipping tea in a small hotel that served snacks to passers-by, I asked the boy who was preparing tea about his plans. His reply was fairly standard: he was planning to go abroad, and he had come to work in this rural hotel for a mere 5000 NPR (50\$) per month in order to save



money to pay brokers to go to the Gulf. In other words, his work in a village ‘hotel’ was no more than a preparation for a major and increasingly normal life-project – that of going abroad. One of the other people sipping tea was a boy, clad in the ochre robes of a Buddhist monk. I was taken aback, because in that part of Nepal it was easier to meet a novice shaman than a Buddhist monk. So when I asked him what he was doing in the village, the boy replied that he came to say good-bye to his family. He would soon be leaving for Thailand to get further education. It was his brother, who, thinking about the boy’s prospects in the village, sent him to one of the Buddhist *gompas* that have spread around the Kathmandu valley over the recent years. The Buddhist *gompa* was seen as one of the ways to become internationally mobile. The third person drinking tea in the hotel was a wife of Maren, a young man who had recently returned from a failed journey abroad.

I met Maren in Kathmandu. Having spent almost five months in Russia and having realized that Russia, even though being a ‘big country’, did not offer opportunities to earn big money, Maren returned to Nepal. Maren’s relatively short trip to Russia cost almost 10,000 USD, but he was lucky that his family could finance his unsuccessful journey. His father having been a long-term migrant in South Korea could pay for the risky undertakings of his son. Maren explained that he was ‘in the process’ of going abroad: meeting prospective brokers, borrowing money and waiting to see whether the previous group of irregular migrants on route to the USA would reach the final destination. Having embarked on the ‘process’ at the age of 17, right after finishing school, the young man was ready to be in the ‘process’ until the age of 30. If unsuccessful in reaching ‘big countries’, he admitted that he might go to the Gulf.

Maren represents the figure of an aspiring irregular migrant – the figure that is becoming increasingly common not only in urban but also in rural areas of Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

### Aspiring irregular migrants dreaming big

The figure of the aspiring irregular migrant might be discarded as unimportant, because the vast majority of Nepali migrants are regular migrants who go to India, the Gulf States and Malaysia, mostly through the registered manpower agencies (see, Kern and Müller-Böcker, 2015 on legal brokers). However, unlike regular migrants travelling to Malaysia and the Gulf, who pay anywhere between 1,000 and 3,000 USD for their journeys, irregular migrants pay up to 60,000 USD to brokers-cum-smugglers. While many of the aspiring irregular migrants to the ‘big countries’ come from the more well-to-do families when compared with other villagers and are certainly not the poorest of the poor, another distinction is that they are either second-generation migrants, with their fathers having migrated to the Gulf, Malaysia or Korea, or that they themselves have travelled to one of these countries prior to embarking on a dangerous irregular journey.

Despite a relatively small proportion of Nepali migrants going to the ‘big countries’, the figure of the aspiring irregular migrant is crucial, because it illuminates the *modus operandi* of the migration industry in Nepal, a large section of which operates in the shadow economy, where the boundaries between licit and illicit actors, between smugglers and politicians, are becoming increasingly blurred.

While Maren’s and Suresh’ case might sound improbable, they were not exceptional. There were literally hundreds of young men like him in Ghorai, a medium-sized bazaar town in the plain lands of Nepal, where I was conducting fieldwork coming and going between 2016 and 2018. The place literally smelled of the migration spirit and was packed with young people from the surrounding hills looking for chances to go abroad. With all the advertisements for learning Japanese and Korean languages, several Gurkha training centres and

multiple education consultancies for studying abroad, young people's imagination was bombarded with plentiful opportunities of starting a different life in a far-away land. Leaving Nepal for 'the big countries', often at any cost – by borrowing huge amounts of money, unthinkable even for the standards of the richer nations, selling off ancestral land, putting the whole of one's property as a collateral into a bank – has become a craze that plagued not only young people, but also their parents who saw 'no future' in Nepal and who were ready to invest the whole of the family's fortune into a highly risky enterprise.

Naresh was another aspiring irregular migrant who took a risk but was scammed by unscrupulous brokers while searching for a better life abroad. Having paid 4000 dollars for a visa to work on a cruise ship and having waited for seven months before he realized that his broker was a swindler, Naresh did not even leave Nepal. He had worked as a teacher in one of the villages in mid-Western Nepal, a job which earned him barely 60 dollars per month. Naresh was dreaming of another future for himself and the family. When I met him, it had been two years since he had been trying to return the money taken by the broker, but to no avail. The only thing that happened over the course of two years was that his debt had more than doubled to 8,000 dollars. While Naresh was planning to go abroad with three friends, he was part of a much bigger group, recruited on the principle that for each extra recruit the participant would get a discount from a broker – with unscrupulous brokers being obviously interested in manufacturing hope and recruiting many people under one scheme, i.e. exploiting the economies of scale – the more people recruited, the more the benefit for the broker.

Yuba's journey was more complicated and somewhat more typical of an increasing tide of Nepali irregular migrants who make it to the USA via the so-called South American route or *thalo batho*, i.e. the underneath/down way, as the Nepali migrants would call it. He had made two failed attempts to reach the USA, which cost him 29,000 dollars – an endeavour that took two and a half years of his life. His itinerary was impressive: from Malaysia to Singapore, then to India, back to Nepal, and starting all over again. Having abandoned his BA degree, Yuba suspended his normal life for several years, his efforts yielded no fruit in the end. Yuba was part of the group of 20 people, 10 of whom were lucky to get straight into Mexico, having avoided the treacherous journey via the Amazon jungle and dozens of irregular border crossings in Latin America. Yuba himself was not lucky, he was part of the group of 10 people who never made it to the USA.

Anar's failed journey to Japan took about nine months. He first went to India, then to Thailand where he spent more than two months, then to Indonesia where he spent another two months only to receive a fake visa via a messenger – a process, which cost him more than 9000 USD. Anar described the process in the following terms

It was said that the work would be done within a week. After, it was said that the work would be done in a week, I came here [to Kathmandu]. Later it was moved to the other week and the next and the next...

Unlike Yuba, who could rely on his parents' savings, Anar took a loan in order to go to Japan. With the interest rate having rapidly increased over the months spent 'in the process', Anar's debt reached more than 14,000 USD at the time of our interview in the spring of 2017. Anar was considering going to the Gulf, this time driven not by the hope of a better life and a long-term future, but rather by debt and the onus of the present. This was a clear case of debt-driven migration, which as shown by Stoll (2010), is becoming normalized in the world of today.

## Unscrupulous brokers cheating big: Manufacturing hope and uncertainty

Whereas aspiring irregular migrants dream big, unscrupulous brokers cheat big. Despite the important role played by the brokers as the guardians of information and opportunities, in Nepal the brokers are generally perceived as a ‘necessary evil’ (Coburn, 2018: 82). While research on brokers in Nepal has stressed the positive role of the brokers in facilitating migration for people who would otherwise remained immobile (Kern and Müller-Böcker, 2015; Thieme, 2017), it has focused largely on the regulated manpower agencies, avoiding the grey zone of illegal brokerage and smuggling. A huge proportion of the migration brokerage in Nepal is carried out by the so-called illegal mid-level brokers, often former migrants themselves, who were driven underground by the stringent legislation adopted in June 2015 (Sijapati and Kharel, 2016). This paper deals with a different level of brokers: I am focusing on the higher-level brokers, many of them protected by politicians and police, some of them working under the guise of educational consultancies, and some of them involved in transnational smuggling rings. While I interviewed several staff from the registered manpower agencies, their narratives emphasized that they worked within the limits of the state law (see Kern and Müller-Böcker, 2015; Thieme, 2017). When I was put in touch with one of the smugglers who worked under the guise of the international consultancy, our skype interview came to an abrupt end when he sensed that I was digging deeper than his official ‘education abroad’ label would have it.

In this paper, I make an analytical distinction between what I call unscrupulous smugglers and regular smuggler-cum-brokers who act as intermediaries in the migration process. While this paper concentrates on unscrupulous brokers, some of my interlocutors told me how grateful they were to their smugglers who not only arranged the journey well, but also allowed for the migrant to embark on a second attempt to reach the USA without paying an extra fee. Not burdened by the need to organize complex logistics like the real-world smugglers, unscrupulous brokers reap much higher returns by exploiting people’s hopes for a better life and what can be called their naivety, without even establishing links with their counterpart smugglers in Latin America, booking airline tickets, arranging housing along the trail. The returns of unscrupulous brokers are also much higher than that of the real-world smugglers: with a group of 23 people, Suresh’s smugglers could earn more than 200,000 USD in a one-off sham scheme, foregoing all the stress and uncertainty of the treacherous journey that can go in many ways, not only for the irregular migrants but also for the smugglers.

But how do unscrupulous brokers manage to cheat people, many of whom have already been abroad? While it is true that networks of trust, such as using the services of the smuggler known for a good job, or kinship ties for better or worse, play an important role, many aspiring migrants come from villages with no prior history of migration to the ‘big countries’ and therefore have no networks to draw on. The knowledge about good smugglers is guarded and is not necessarily shared between villages. So first-time migrants to the ‘big countries’ often have to take a risk and go with those brokers who come to villages selling big dreams.

Suresh’s story is quite exemplary in this respect. Having returned from South Korea, where he was earning more than a thousand dollars per month – a salary that most of the international labour migrants from Nepal in the Gulf States would only dream of – Suresh, using his own words, ‘became greedy’ (*lobh lagyo*) and started ‘dreaming big’ (*thulo sapana ayo*). But Suresh’s dream did not appear in a vacuum – there is a whole industry in Nepal interested in manufacturing hope and recruiting people into migration schemes. It was



ignited by the local-level brokers who tried to recruit clients through networks of trust and kinship in their natal villages:

They [brokers] spoke excessively about it [arranging to go to Canada as earthquake refugees]. So I felt that maybe, yes, they would do as they say. They have the connection with the governmental people. He [the broker] is a *ritual son* after all [of one of the leading politicians in Nepal]. I was fascinated. I felt that they would actually do what they said. If they don't, the decision will take place after three months, and the money will be returned back to me.

In contrast to many other contexts, where irregular migrants pay the sum to the smugglers only when reaching the final destination (Baird and Van Liempt, 2016), in the case of Nepal, all of the irregular migrants, at least to my knowledge, are forced to pay big portions of the overall sum before the journey. After handing over the money, aspiring migrants are often made to wait for months before they can start their journey.

The notion that time is money becomes quite literal, because many of the migrants borrow money at 36% annual interest rate. Waiting for the 'imminent departure' in a situation of debt leads to a state of suspense: the stakes are exceptionally high, the desire to depart is frustrated, but the aspiring migrants can do nothing about that. They can just wait. By recruiting hopeful migrants and then by making them wait, brokers acquire unprecedented power over them. Bourdieu (2000: 228) cogently described the kind of affect that prolonged waiting induces on people:

Waiting implies submission . . . [it] modifies the behavior of the person who 'hangs', as we say, on the awaited decision. It follows the art of . . . making people wait, of delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing, which would have the effect of killing the waiting itself, is an integral part of the exercise of power . . . especially of powers which . . . work on and through aspirations, on and through time . . .

Naresh's story was strikingly similar to Suresh's story and illustrates the relationship between time, money and power:

I met the agent. He sounded reliable. I gave him money. He was postponing the flight that he said was within three months. He took my three lakhs [3,000 USD]. Now, I am not going anywhere . . . We were told that there would be a flight within three months. Later he said that it is difficult to set the time. So, ten, twenty days passed by. He got us to wait for three months. We were asked to prepare money . . . For three months, we would meet even daily. He used to call us himself and report what was happening. We frequently asked him when we would send us, but then he disappeared.

Suresh's and Naresh's case follows the same scenario: raising the aspiring migrants' hopes, taking an initial sizable monetary instalment that would keep the aspiring migrants captive, and then keeping them waiting while making extreme uncertainty *and* keeping the hope alive. Not only would migrants be totally powerless, they would also be trapped by the money they had already given to the broker. In such a situation, waiting becomes a state of suspense – the entire plot of the journey and its starting date are unknown, with migrants often having no idea about where and when they are going, except for a nebulous main destination. Because of the debt and the interest rate increasing with each month of the

delay, most of the aspiring migrants reach an affective state when they would do anything to start the journey and regain a sense of agency. Suresh went on:

Three months passed. Four months passed, five months flew away. The money... At first the amount was two lakhs [roughly 2000 USD]. Later... after 5–6 months passed away, I wondered why my money wasn't returned. When I asked for my passport and the money, they said, 'No! The processing is taking place. First, you have to go to India. I am trying to adjust it as per the governmental process.' My money was already trapped. If I hadn't already given the money, I would have said, 'No! I won't do it.' But, because of the 2 lakhs, I went there to India... 23 people went along with me... First he took 2 lakh [from everyone]... After I went to Bombay, again he took 2 lakh 65,000, that is, 2,500 USD per person.

After having waited for almost half a year in Nepal and having been stranded in a hotel in India, the aspiring migrants in Suresh's group just wanted to move on. One of Suresh's friends explained that while waiting in a hotel in Mumbai, they finally received a phone-call from Kathmandu informing them that the visa had been granted. Acting as though in a state of affect, he called his relatives in the village asking them to borrow yet *more* money and transfer it to the bank account of the unscrupulous broker, who promised that everyone would be going to Canada in a week. While Suresh's friend was ready to get into more debt, Suresh felt suspicious and wanted to get his instalment reimbursed, but he quickly realized that it was a naïve thought. 'Who gives the money back once it is handed?', he concluded.

Pausing people on route to their dream destinations and making them wait in a state of suspense was one of the techniques of extolling money. Such stories were all too common. Such a situation could happen in the village even before the start of the journey. It could happen in an unknown hotel in one of the transit countries, be it Indonesia on route to Japan or Guatemala on route to the USA: migrants would be pressed for money in order to continue their journeys further. Thus, after having paid a huge instalment upfront, irregular migrants were told that in order to go on they had to make an additional payment. In other words, there was a clear monetary logic to the experience of waiting – and it worked in radically different ways for the aspiring migrants and the brokers.

### **Waiting in suspense and subjects devoid of agency**

Making people wait and keeping them in a state of uncertainty while keeping the hope alive was one of the ways to govern them and make them pliable, because long-term suspense is rife with the feeling of anxiety and exhaustion. Being subjected to waiting is the theme that runs through the accounts of most regular and irregular migrants in Nepal: waiting for visas, waiting for the broker's phone-call, waiting for the money to be borrowed in the village. It appears that even ethical smugglers, manpower agencies and local hotel-owners use the technique of making people wait. Furthermore, as noted by Coburn (2018: 270), it is not just brokers or traffickers who use this technique, but also international resettlement organizations, who Coburn refers to as the 'distant cousins of the brokers selling jobs and visas in Nepal and India' (p. 319). The nature of waiting inflicted on Ahmed, one of Coburn's Afghan research participants (2018: 318), by the US State Department is strikingly similar to the waiting inflicted by unscrupulous brokers:

You submitted your application and heard nothing for months, then suddenly you'd get a call to go to the embassy to take a lie detector test, then you'd hear nothing again for months, and then all of a sudden you had a visa. It was nerve-wracking. Applicants did not know whether they

should be packing to leave the country or whether they were going to remain in Afghanistan, constantly in danger due to the work that they performed as contractors for the United States.

Yuba was not waiting for a decision from the US State Department. He was just hoping to reach the USA, hoping that several tens of thousands of dollars would get him there. Yuba described his engagement with an ethical smuggler who did plan a real journey to the USA, but the journey had too many stops in unpredictable destinations: Malaysia, India and so on:

It's not certain when the contractor would call us... The contractor would always promise that it would work out, today or tomorrow (*aaja pani huncha, bholi pani huncha bhancha*). This is their *system*. Once we are prepared to get the job done, we have to be dedicated. The contractor would keep on postponing the date. This is how eight months passed.

Having spent eight months in India in a group of nine, Yuba returned to Nepal and tried to go to the USA via the same contractor.

Why did you trust him up until then?

He had not applied by then. He went on cheating us that that time he would apply... Again he asked eight hundred thousand rupees [8,000 USD, after the initial payment of 8,000 USD]. He promised us that this time the task would be done. This is how he ate up sixteen lakh [16,000 USD]. After that, he asked for four hundred thousand rupees from each of us. Thus, he took twenty lakh rupees from each of us, right? I spent around nine lakh rupees in food etc. It went on like this, and at last he made us wait without doing anything.

Apart from creating subjects devoid of agency – forcing them to live a life in a state of suspense, waiting for directions from those running the show, while the whole plot of the show is never fully revealed – making people wait predates on people's vulnerability and their lack of knowledge of visa regimes, legal provisions, foreign languages, etc. Creating ambiguity and withdrawing all the available information was a technique used by brokers sending aspiring migrants to Iraq or Afghanistan to work on military bases (Coburn, 2018). My fieldwork shows that cases of falling prey to fraud were much more common in villages where irregular migrants were among the first ones to go to the so-called big countries in the whole village, as was the case of Naresh and Suresh. In contrast, I have hardly heard of fraudulent cases in one of the remote villages in mid-Western Nepal where hundreds of people have made it to the USA and who knew the names of reliable brokers-cum-smugglers, but kept them secret.

Suresh recalled how the brokers used threat and manipulative techniques in order to extract money from people who were not well-versed in the migration process and people who were not that well connected. But the manipulation techniques were much more effective, because the aspiring migrants were suspended in time and place and their debt was getting bigger day by day. The alternative of returning home with debt on their hands was not something they were looking towards. It would be equal to losing honour, Suresh recalled:

When they called us... I returned back the call and said, 'Give me my 5 lakh [5,000 USD], my passport back to me and cancel my visa.'... He didn't agree. What he told... threatened me with was, 'You passport will reach the Ministry of Foreign Affairs'... he lied to me. And why

would my passport go there? ... 'Will I get my passport through Foreign Ministry?', I asked. 'No, you will not get it. The police will arrest you and you will be jailed in Hanuman Dhoka [prison].' The Indian agent was the one who threatened ... He continuously tried to persuade me. First he asked for 10 lakh rupees, then 8 lakhs, and then he said, 'Alright, don't tell your friends and just give me 4 lakh and ask your friends to give 8 lakh each.' I got even more suspicious. I felt that he was doing something wrong. So I told all my friends not to send the money and also that I wouldn't either ... Our 5 lakh were trapped while the others paid 15 lakhs each.

The striking pattern about irregular migration from Nepal to the USA, Japan or Canada is that, according to my data, aspiring migrants never pay the set price. Essentially, it is a top-up model of irregular migration, with the brokers having control over the top-ups. It is always increased along the journey: *top-ups*, as they call it, come up after all kinds of *set-ups*, real and fake, in Indian hotels and the Amazon jungle, depending on how far the party has reached. In his research on trans-Saharan transit migration, Collyer (2007: 676) noted that undocumented migrants who travelled through an independently organized migration system experienced an increase in the cost of transit during the journey. This was in contrast to Bangladeshi migrants who travelled through large organized smuggling networks and who paid a single price before they left or on arrival at the destination. My impression that even though quite a few of my research participants travelled through organized transnational smuggling networks, they hardly ever paid the set price (though there was a movement in that direction among the migrants who started travelling in 2018 and who took only three months to reach the USA, which means that smuggling networks got more organized).

The 'process', as the migrants explained to me, is never ending. On return from their failed journeys, migrants would become busy trying to get the money back. People have to search for justice with the police, but they soon realize that the police cannot do anything. In fact, the police are often linked to the smugglers and politicians. As one of the failed irregular migrants told me, when he went to the police, there had been multiples cases filed against his broker, but the broker himself was in Malaysia. Finding no justice in the police, some of the migrants looked for assistance from the local dons, often affiliated to political parties. But even when the migrants were successful in returning part of the money with the help of dons, as was the case of Naresh, the sum was so small and the expenses of living in Kathmandu and paying to the dons were so big that Naresh was still in debt.

Even when the brokers were put into prison, as with Suresh's smuggler, they did not return money but kept the failed migrants waiting, promising them yet another journey, this time successful, on condition that they drop the police case. Through a sequence of quite improbable events, Suresh's group managed to catch and even imprison the main broker. It turned out that the broker had cheated one of the education consultancies in Kathmandu for more than a hundred thousand dollars. Putting their forces together, the education consultancy and the cheated migrants managed to lure the broker into Kathmandu. The only way to do that was by saying that some of the migrants who had not paid the full sum would give him cash in Kathmandu in a hope of starting yet another journey to Canada. So 'greed' played a bad trick on the broker himself: he was caught at the check-point to Kathmandu and imprisoned. But it did not help the aspiring failed migrants to return the money: even while being in prison, the broker made people wait, trying to seduce them by offering new schemes of going abroad. Suresh explained:

He says that he would give us the money but that is not happening. Just a few days ago, he told me that he would send my money in ten days, ten days are gone, but there is no money. If Indians gave him money, he would give me mine. But when? ... I used *gunda* [thugs, dons] and

got some money, but spent all that. For three of us, we got two lakhs and all money was spent on lodging and food there [in KTM].

Time is against those in debt. In the capitalist economy, time is money, and whereas the unscrupulous smuggler is able to use the money and get huge profits and interest on the stolen money, for the migrants, the passage of time means the reverse. There is more debt, more uncertainty and more anxiety with each month, with the dead certainty of debt having replaced a hopeful uncertainty of credit that went into financing the journeys, many of which were to remain a mere fantasy.

### **Conclusion: The migration industry as a new system of profiteering**

Bayart (2007: 274) has argued that waiting is intrinsic to globalization, and, citing Mexico as an example, showed that whole regions in the contemporary world live in a state of waiting for visa, jobs, papers, smugglers, to be expelled or returned. Nepal is a newcomer compared to the other zones of waiting that have proliferated around the world over the last two decades.<sup>5</sup> Whereas waiting understood as boredom is often said to have a generative potential (Masquelier, 2013; Ralph, 2008), this paper has focused on the political economy of waiting in late capitalism and waiting as a state of suspense, which deprives people of agency and exhausts their financial and emotional resources. Making people wait while keeping their hopes for a better future alive can be conceptualized as a way to exercise power generally and as an important technique of governmentality used by the migration industry actors in Nepal for controlling aspiring migrants' movement, extracting surplus value through the exploitation of migrants' hope and their state of affect, not their labour. As the introduction to this edited volume argues, the labour of hope is increasingly becoming a source of profit-making in late capitalism.

Forcing aspiring migrants to wait in suspense for uncertain departures, unscrupulous brokers create an affective state in people who would give everything to start their journeys. This allows those in power to prey on migrants' financial vulnerability and their hope for a better life, pushing many of the aspiring migrants into grave debt. By making people wait, the brokers ensure that the desire to leave the place for another destination gets an obsessive quality to it, and people are ready to take huge risks and make irrational moves. For aspiring migrants, time is money. Each month of waiting increases their debt, and after two years of not having returned the initial sum, say 20,000 USD, they will have to start paying a 36%–50% annual interest rate on double the sum they had initially borrowed, i.e. 40,000 USD.

The higher the hopes of aspiring irregular migrants, the bigger the scale of the sham schemes they can be trapped into. Unscrupulous smugglers, essentially frauds who take thousands of dollars for journeys, which are never even supposed to start, operate economies of scale by recruiting many people into groups that will be doomed to waithood for months on end before finding out that their money had been taken for nothing. The modus operandi of Nepali smugglers, both ethical and unethical, stands in sharp contrast to some of the other countries: for instance, in many contexts migrants pay a full sum to the broker only on reaching the final point of destination (see Koser, 2008). However, aspiring migrants in Nepal pay a big proportion upfront, and, being kept in a state of suspense throughout their journey, they are forced to top-up smugglers' money in order to continue their perilous trips towards their dream destinations. The option of going back is barred from them: it would mean losing honour, being subjected to shame and admitting that their dream is never going to become true. They need to move onwards at any cost. And even when back in



Nepal, they have to think of a way to start 'the process' all over again, for they are trapped in debt. The only way out of debt is making it to the big countries, essentially debt-driven migration (Stoll, 2010).

The argument I have been making in this article is not just about unscrupulous or ethical brokers: there are way more actors involved. The migration industry in Nepal has become a total phenomenon. Thus, it is not only brokers who make money by making people wait. 'Hotel' owners who receive aspiring migrants from rural areas in Kathmandu can make more money if people stay longer. It might not be a coincidence that the local-level brokers often turn out to be hotel-owners catering for people from their native villagers, arranging visas for them while making them wait, just a little bit longer in their hotels, all in order to make just a bit of more money. Bureaucrats who issue birth certificates, citizenship papers and passports can all make a bit of money through delaying the process and speeding it up so that the aspiring migrants provide a bribe – the story I have heard from some of the migrants who had to return to the district headquarters thrice from the village. Migrants who are caught in the situation of waiting as suspense are also good for money-lenders, who, I was told, charge higher interest rates to those people who are in desperate need of money in order to depart. Finally, the international migrant labour force is also good for private-school owners in Nepal, many of whom have links to political parties and to manpower agencies. Most of the migrants, regular and irregular, channel remittances for their children's education, often in low-quality private schools. It is also good for the real estate agents and brokers, as the remittance economy has driven land prices to unprecedented levels, so that a house with a tiny plot of land in the village in the mid-Western hills of Nepal might cost up to 20,000 USD dollars.

I was told by one of the returned migrants from the Gulf that the government itself has become a broker in Nepal (*sarkar yaha dalal nai ho*), which hints at the ways in which the state is being transformed in the process. During the course of my fieldwork, I was told time and again that none of the big smugglers would be able to operate without the cover of political parties. Furthermore, some of the politicians, I was told, act as smugglers-in-law: one of the young people told me about the local politicians running the smuggling business alongside a rich portfolio of other businesses; another told me about a Nepali human-rights activist in Mexico who acted as a smuggler-cum-mediator for hundreds of young people intent on reaching the USA. Other soon-to-be migrants, who I met by chance in Kathmandu, told me of the scheme they were a part of: one of the MPs was going on a trip to Germany and he would be able to take them as assistants, but, of course, for a fee. After paying 20,000 USD they hoped that they would be able to enter one of the 'big countries' without the dangers of an irregular journey across the sea. The politician would also get a beautiful pay-off, because the size of the group would be at least 10 people. Arguably, the most fraudulent category of brokers are the people in power who are able to exploit aspiring migrants' hope for a better life abroad and their prolonged waiting in a state of suspense, while being protected by privileges that their political status grants them.

Thus, despite the influx of remittances, the economic and political impact of migration is not so clear-cut. The migration industry in Nepal – a complex network of brokers, smugglers, money-lenders, hotel-owners, politicians, etc. – has become a major system of profiteering, built on the exploitation of people's hopes, their lack of feel for the game, and the perpetuation of the economies of waiting, resulting in a progressive blurring of the lines between legal and illegal actors in Nepal. Not only does the migration industry in Nepal thrive on illegality, but also on Nepal's underdevelopment. In such a situation, many of the aspiring migrants feel that Nepal is turning into a terrain of hopelessness where 'there is no

future'. Hence, they are ready to 'sell' themselves into debt, suspend their lives and embark on highly treacherous journeys that, if successful, become the beginning of life quite different from what they had initially hoped for.

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### Notes

1. Instead of going down with an increasing number of irregular migrants, the price for the journey was going up: brokers could make much more profit by recruiting as many people as possible.
2. The word *dalal* commonly used to refer to brokers has stark negative connotations because it is also used to refer to pimps. Therefore, the word *dalal* is loathed by the brokers who prefer to be called agents.
3. See Adhikari (2010) for the role of International Education Consultancies in migration brokerage in Nepal.
4. In arguing for the analytical importance of the figure of the 'aspiring irregular migrant', I am drawing on Biao's (2014) concept of would-be migrant.
5. And it is not just a phenomenon in the Global South: making people wait as a way of earning profit is also a technique used by government agencies in such countries as the UK where the Home Office has exponentially increased the cost of visas over the last years and charges higher rates for an 'expedient' route (Marsh, 2018).

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