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Research note

Waiting: Social Meanings of Immobility in Kathmandu, Nepal

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Summary
This research note looks closely at transnational mobility as a lived experience in the city of Kathmandu, Nepal. It sheds light on the lives of aspirant migrants to show how uncertainties around mobility shape their everyday lives in the city, whereby immobility is not juxtaposed against mobility but is rather interwoven with it. Here, waiting for news about vacancies from the local agent, waiting to get selected for an interview, waiting to bid farewell to their families and waiting to return to them conditions the ebbs and flows of their mobile, working lives. It shows that waiting, as experienced by the migrants, can have different subjective tonalities. While it may be experienced in an emotionally neutral manner, as periods of inactivity around which their everyday routine is designed, it could also be perceived as a failure to meet gendered and familial expectations. Disturbing the productivitist association of waiting with inactivity, many migrants also view their period of employment abroad (activity) as an extended period of waiting, around which their life course is outlined. These differing perceptions of waiting provide interesting ethnographic insights into our conceptualization of mobility, immobility and perceptions of time.

Keywords: Waiting, aspirations, mediation, brokerage, migrant subjectivities

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Introduction

In the capital city of the 5th largest remittance-receiving country in the world (World Bank 2019) and a significant labor exporter in South Asia, mobility is characterized by many irregular phases of immobility—of waiting. In Nepal, *baideshik rojgar* or foreign employment, is a predominantly male activity (MOLESS 2020) that households use as a strategy to create and sustain a source of income amidst falling agricultural output, a lack of decent employment opportunities, political uncertainty and a prevailing "culture of migration," fueled by the development-driven migration policies of the newly democratic, remittance-reliant country. Here, migration is deeply embedded into the male lifecycle and mobility is a significant part of meeting society's gendered and familial expectations (Thieme 2006, Sharma 2008). However, mobility is deeply intertwined with periods of *pratīkṣā gardai* or waiting and this research note explains the multi-dimensionality of waiting as an experience from the perspective of the migrants. This note uses data from ethnographically informed qualitative research[1] conducted in Kathmandu to unravel the mundaneness of waiting as a lived experience that creates a palpable restlessness among the labor migrants in search of *baideshik rojgar* and looks into the social meanings of waiting that these migrants ascribe to different stages of the migration process.

Looking at mobility in terms of "flows" might insinuate a voluntary and aspirational movement of migrant workers from one place to another. However, that is hardly the case for the low-skilled migrant workers who have come to occupy the peripheries of the global capitalist order and who are absorbed into destination countries' segmented labor markets (Pattisson 2013, Donini 2019). As scholars working on migration infrastructure have recently pointed out, such migrants do not "flow" from one country to another but are rather "moved," "transplanted" and "placed" by a number of commercially motivated intermediaries to meet the demand for cheap and disposable workers (Lindquist et al. 2012, Xiang 2008). Labor market intermediaries—or brokers in common parlance—create, channel and condition these flows of cross-border mobility. Intensive intermediation by these actors, however, does not simplify mobility but rather makes it procedural and convoluted (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 2018). As a

1 During the author's research stay in Kathmandu between 2019 and 2020, a total of 40 in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted to study the recruitment industry in Nepal facilitating the cross-border migration of low-skilled migrant workers to the Gulf countries, Malaysia and Japan. Additionally, a number of non-participatory observations were carried out in well-known migrant waiting spots, during interview and training sessions at the recruitment agencies, as well as at migrant-run canteens and eateries where aspirant migrants went to have affordable meals and interact with one another. Conversations with migrants were mostly conducted in a mix of Hindi and Nepali, and later transcribed in English. All of the names of the interviewees are pseudonymized and the photographs used in this paper were captured by the author with sensitivity pertaining to the identities of the migrants.

result, migrants' cross-border mobility is interrupted by several phases of immobility and "waiting through spaces of mobility (becomes) an often-inevitable and frequent experience woven through the fabric of the mobile everyday" (Bissell 2007, 277).

Waiting is not a homogenous experience. It differs from one context to another, depending on the reason and duration of the wait, the spatial arrangement of the act of waiting, and, more importantly, on the perceptions and experiences of waiting. In understanding waiting, it is also important to identify what the migrant workers do while waiting, who they do it with, and whether waiting is active or passive in the given context, raising questions of intentionality, purpose, power and agency. For example, in the context of the informal sector in India, Breman (1996, 2020) speaks of "footloose" workers, or workers who are always in transit, moving from one job assignment to another. Shedding light on the flexibilization and casualization of work that forces workers to be footloose, Breman points out how the global capitalist regime uproots workers and keeps them mobile, never allowing them to fully settle down. Similarly, Xiang (2004) describes Indian IT workers being "put on the bench" and kept waiting indefinitely for suitable jobs. "Benching" of workers happens either before a new job or during periods of unemployment, during which time they are forced to take up a number of unskilled, low-paid assignments to survive the wait. Similarly, Gidwani and Maringanti (2016) speak of "floating workers," as those who experience episodic unemployment as a result of the casualization of employment relationships and how these workers are neither fully included nor completely expelled from the reserve army of labor but are rather caught in a "spatiotemporal flux in and tenuousness of capital's embrace" (Gidwani and Maringanti 2016: 121). The experiences of waiting in these instances are qualitatively different yet they highlight how waiting is a conceptually significant site of study, with a focus on workers *in transit* rather than on workers at sites of production. Waiting as an experience therefore interacts with a number of factors and this note serves as a prelude to a larger discussion on migrant subjectivities and experiences.

This research note proceeds as follows: The next section begins by pointing out how mobility, immobility and waiting are mediated processes under the current regime of migration governance and how mediation, contrary to expectations, makes mobility complicated and intercepted. In the following three sub-sections and using the voices and narratives of Nepali migrant workers, I discuss how waiting is not a homogenous experience. Waiting means different things to different migrants depending on their migration trajectory and their personal lifeworld. While it can be a habituated part of everyday life, something that the migrants use to design their daily routine, it can also represent their failure to "successfully" migrate and meet gendered social expectations. For some others, waiting can also be associated with the period of employment itself, challenging our preconceived notions of waiting as inactivity or unproductivity. These different

perceptions and experiences of waiting provoke us to reconsider the boundaries between home/destination, activity/inactivity and mobility/immobility.

Ebbs and flows in mediated mobility

Transnational migration has become an extremely mediated process, especially in the migrant-sending countries of South and Southeast Asia. With the formalization of migration procedures and with identity cards, skill training certification and medical reports becoming instruments of migration regulation, a significant proportion of cross-border mobility is channeled through licensed labor brokers or intermediaries, on whom states and migrants are structurally dependent (Lindquist 2010, Xiang 2013). In Nepal, over 90% of work permits for employment abroad are obtained through these brokerage agencies, locally known as manpower agencies. The highly procedural nature of the formalities pertaining to labor migration and related documentation (or "paperwork"), rampant corruption, and lack of transparency make it very difficult for most migrants to access employment abroad without the involvement of multiple layers of intermediaries, both within and outside Nepal (Kern and Müller-Böker 2015). Brokers thrive within this institutional gap and they respond to and construct migrant aspirations within Nepal (Shreshta 2018). These entrepreneurial groups provide a range of services to these migrants—from obtaining information about vacancies, conducting or facilitating interviews on behalf of/with employers and training migrants, to assisting them in mobilizing funds for the migration process, and intimately regulating their lives even after departure until the end of contract period. The mediation of local agents and brokerage agencies therefore plays a crucial role in shaping the migration trajectories of Nepali workers.

Intermediation in cross-border mobility and recruitment for foreign employment, however, does not translate into simpler migration trajectories. Although facilitation is its primary goal, directed at meeting the information deficit and coordinating demand and supply across borders, intermediation tends to make the migration process procedural, channeled yet highly fragmented (Lindquist 2010, Xiang 2013). Studies on the Asian brokerage context have recently shown that the formalization of transnational migration by the means of licensing recruitment agencies and making them key actors in channeling the migration process has caused involution and the shrinking of mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 2018). A thickening of migration bureaucracy, which in many migrant-sending countries such as Nepal is done for the protection of the migrant workers and to limit the chance of exploitation, has not translated into straightforward channels of mobility. It has rather made migration as an experience more complicated for the migrant and has created many different phases of uncertainty and waiting. Mediated mobility has therefore produced rhythms of mobility and immobility through which migrant workers navigate their experiences of transnational migration.

Waiting, however, is not always the same as an absence of or delay in mobility. Waiting, as a product of intermediation, is in fact intimately intertwined with mobility. The ebbs and flows in the migrant worker's life as a result of their aspiration or need to move abroad for work thus need to be looked at from the point of view of the structural dependence of migrants and states on brokering intermediaries (Xiang 2013). Waiting also needs to be understood in relation to activity or inactivity. As David Bisell (2007) reminds us, waiting is not simply a suspension of time or a stasis. It is the relationality of activity and inactivity that defines the period of waiting. He points out that the productivist bias in studies on waiting as a phenomenon have looked at waiting from the lens of absence of activity only and this has been mirrored in migration literature, in that periods of immobility have merely been equated with anticipation of mobility. This simplistic understanding of waiting also hinders analysis of migration whereby an individual migratory journey, a departure, or an arrival would be considered spatiotemporal nodes of mobility and the overall cycle of mobility/immobility would be overlooked. In a context in which circular migration is more of a norm than an exception, individual journeys of two—three years of contractual employment restrict our understanding to a means/end viewpoint and do not fully capture the migration experience of the transnational worker. This research note expresses the need to look at the intimate interactions of migrants with activity and inactivity and with fellow migrants and family, to understand how mobility and immobility are not juxtaposed against one another, but rather approach waiting as a co-constitutive element of the mediated migration experience.

Waiting as a way of life

For many new and returnee (from now on "aspirant") migrant men between the ages of 20 and 40 in Kathmandu, waiting is an integral part of their daily routine. It is common to find aspirant migrants waiting on the street corners of Kathmandu, seemingly idle and not visibly doing anything, standing out from the rapidly moving crowd of the city. While some men are seen waiting in public areas for news regarding their foreign employment and have developed a routine around it, many others have adopted waiting as a way of life and as certain phases of uncertain times between two contractual employments. The mundaneness in waiting, a restlessness to move (again, in the case of returnee migrants) and obtain *baideshik rojgar*, or foreign employment, is palpable in the city.

A few kilometers from the *Guashala chowk*[2] in Kathmandu, is the *manpower bazaar* (see Image 1)—a spatial concentration of recruitment agencies near the

2 A *chowk* in South Asia's northern belt (Pakistan, India and Nepal) refers to a junction or an intersection of two or more roads. It denotes a central point and is also used to refer to local marketplaces. A few kilometers from the *Gaushala chowk* is a spatial concentration of recruitment agencies that facilitate cross-border mobility. Colloquially known as the *manpower Bazaar*, this marketplace is essentially different from the caricature of bazaar economy painted by renowned

Tribhuvan International airport. The landscape is dotted with numerous guesthouses and cheap lodging options which migrant workers and tourists use to stay in the city on a temporary basis. Like any typical *chowk*, the area is also very well connected, with public and private-operated buses and shared minibuses or coasters taking commuters across Kathmandu Valley. The centralized migration procedures in Nepal that were developed to regulate emigration and monitor the activities of recruitment agencies have caused the spatial concentration of manpower agencies in the city and have forced migrant workers to leave their homes and be physically present in Kathmandu in order to initiate the process of documentation and recruitment.

Image 1: Migrants waiting near the manpower bazaar for their local agent to take them to a recruitment agency

Source: Photograph taken by the author, 19-01-2020, Kathmandu. CC BY-SA 4.0.

anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in which localized interactions, factionalized transactions, and stable and prolonged clientele defines the market relationship (Geertz 1978: 29). The relationships in this market, in contrast, are largely formalized and institutionalized, wherein the registered and licensed recruitment agencies are centrally monitored by the state. However, local caste, community and kinship dynamics continue to influence market activities and interactions.

The first point of contact for the aspirant migrant worker is often the local agent, similar to other migrant-sending contexts in Asia (Lindquist 2010). A local agent is a very mobile actor, someone who usually has had some migration experience of their own and is responsible for recruiting workers at the village level. The migrants tend to trust these local actors better than the unknown recruitment firms based in Kathmandu city. The agent uses this trust to mobilize workers locally and visits the recruitment agencies within the city with a bag full of passports and hopes. Once in Kathmandu, the agents assist the migrant workers in finding cheap, affordable lodgings near *Gaushala chowk,* take them from one interview to another, and guide them through migration-related procedures and formalities. In the absence of an interview, there is not much to be done in the city but to wait. Much of this waiting involves not doing anything and incorporating this "not doing" as part of their daily life.

Image 2: Aspirant migrants in waiting, often spotted standing or squatting in the stretch between Guashala chowk and Pashupati plaza

Source: Photograph taken by the author, 09-12-2019, Kathmandu. CC BY-SA 4.0.

The migrant workers in the city wait for different reasons. As one of them said,

> Some are doing *pratīkṣā* [waiting] for their agents to show up. Many have come from outside [of Kathmandu] and this is like a meeting point for us to meet our agent who will then take us to the [recruitment] agency. Some are […] just

> standing and seeing the city from here. These people are staying at the *dharmshalas* [cheap lodgings provided by charitable or religious institutions] and are just outside soaking the sun and doing *time-pass*. Some are waiting for their transport […] like that […] nothing new (December 09, 2019, Kathmandu; see Image 2).

The mundaneness of waiting is "nothing new" to the migrants as they design their everyday lives in the city around these moments of waiting. Waiting here primarily implies inactivity in the anticipation of activity, which in this case is cross-border mobility. This period of waiting before departure can last anything between a few days to many months and is usually considered a prequel to the "preparatory" phase of migration whereby a suitable agency is found, interviews are arranged, training (if relevant for the position) is completed, medical checkups and state-instituted orientation programs are completed. Unlike the preparatory phase of migration, which involves finishing a number of tasks and formalities, the pre-preparatory phase of waiting involves *samaya bitā'unē* (passing time) and is usually considered an emotionally neutral endeavor. The migrants waiting in the public spaces in Kathmandu and the routines they design around this phase display a material experience of patience and impatience at the same time; an urge to move yet a realization of the inevitability of the wait. "Time-pass" here is therefore neither good nor bad; it is just an ineludible phase of transnational migration marked by immobility.

"Time-pass" is a very common phrase used in the South Asian sub-continent, usually referring to doing nothing productive but passing time. It can mean a wastage of time but it can also imply a jovial and relaxed passage of time, without any negative connotations. Craig Jefferey (2010), for example, notes the usage of the phrase by unemployed youths in India, at times signifying a frustration among the population and at times used to refer to time spent with fellow "time-passers," merely hanging out. However, unlike the privileged, upper-caste male loiterers in the sub-continent forming "*addas*" (Roy 2012) or meeting points in public spaces for intellectual and political discussion while joking and claiming the public space, waiting among the Nepali migrants does not appear to be assertive. It is, as one of the interviewees described it, about seeing the time go by and knowing that one is not alone in doing so. Often found in small groups, migrants wait with fellow migrants or agents in and around *manpower bazaar*. The acts of standing, squatting, leaning against the fence, looking at phones, playing games, etc. help them to deal with "doing nothing" with fellow migrants. However, this lack of impetus associated with "doing nothing" is also not the same as boredom, an idea that is a product of Western modernity, the compartmentalization of work and leisure time, and individualism (Gardiner 2012). In contrast, waiting as "doing nothing" is oriented towards a near, more immediate future of "doing something"—of being mobile again, of being able to work and financially support one's family. It does not come from a place of mismatch between available time

and self-gratifying leisurely activity, but rather represents a sense of personhood and being *in* time (Musharbash 2007).

Waiting is here a social event and not an individual act. With "corporeally engaging practices" such as standing all day and looking around, these workers-in-waiting experience inactivity together in the anticipation of a better, more mobile future (Bissell 2007). Waiting in public places in this context also signifies a passive witnessing of urban life and incorporating one's inactivity into the active urban rhythm of the city. Amidst the busy sounds of the city, while observing the rush of working hours, the chaos of the bus station, the groups of tourists visiting important landmarks nearby, while sharing a cup of tea and anecdotes from work abroad, waiting also lets these men bond and allows them to view migration for employment as a shared experience. The gendered use of public spaces in South Asian countries, of course, does not allow women to be part of such gatherings and the experience of waiting for female migrants will have very different tonalities, something this research note does not attempt to capture, but which has attracted rich scholarly attention in the last two decades (see amongst others Phadke et al. 2009, Yeoh and Huang 1998, 2010).

Waiting as failure

Among the many roles that recruitment agencies play in Nepal, keeping a stock of "failed" migrant workers ready for recruitment is one of them, leaving a reservoir of "just-in-time," deadline-ready workers (De Stefano 2015). As one senior employee of a recruitment agency said as a part of the "orientation" before an interview with a reputed airline catering company:

> We are like a river […] there is a flow. So, don't worry if you don't clear this interview. See this as an experience ok? Even if you don't get selected today, there is another interview next week, and another in another 2 weeks. So, don't worry. You will get something […] you (just) have to be patient and confident (March 13, 2020, Kathmandu).

Waiting, in this context, is associated with a period of time spent on unsuccessful attempts at transnational migration and cross-border employment. Much like the proverbial frog in the princess tale, migrants are expected to remain patient while they have several interviews until one of them "clicks." It is expected that they will develop patience to counter the general sense of unease and restlessness that many migrants understandably face during prolonged periods of uncertainty. There appears to be a general sense of impatience with waiting or, more specifically, not moving for prospective work abroad. My conversations with Bhola provided a rich glimpse into this feeling of uneasiness with immobility as he described his experience of waiting as failure.

Image 3: Bhola looking at the list of selected migrant workers for a reputable airline catering company based in Dubai. Bhola was rejected without any explanation from the recruitment agency

Source: Photograph taken by the author, 25-02-2020, Kathmandu. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Bhola (pseudonym) is a 30-year-old aspirant migrant based in the city of Kathmandu (see Image 3). He, like many other migrants, started working abroad as soon as it was legal for him to do so. Bhola was around 19 years old when, having gained some domestic experience and training in waiting tables in restaurants, he first went to Dubai. Despite being trained and experienced in waiting tables and having been told by the recruitment agency that the job he was going to get in Dubai would be "in his field," his first job abroad was as a cleaner in a pest control company. On being asked why he stuck to the work, Bhola said "I didn't know any of that […] it was my first job. I was just 18 years or something […] didn't have much idea about foreign jobs. So, I went for it anyway." After displaying dedication to his work as a cleaner in the first few months, his employer asked Bhola if he wanted a promotion. Being the only person among the cleaning recruits who could speak English fluently and who could therefore "listen to instructions about chemicals," Bhola was asked to undertake some brief training on pesticide and pest control. They gave him a new job as "some technician kind of person" and put him in the pest control department. Within a year's time, he had been promoted to "team leader" and had technicians working under him to control and monitor

operations in pest-infested sites. Bhola liked the status of the job, although he was aware that his health had deteriorated due to exposure to hazardous chemicals. He was proud of the fact that, unlike the other cleaners who had come with him, he ate his lunch with the local staff. As he said,

> Because I was working with chemicals […] no? It was serious work, so they gave me hygiene[ic] food with Arabic people. They also nominated me often as employee of the month […] I was doing well […] gave me appreciation […] gave me certificates.

But by the end of two extended contracts and 6 years with the company, Bhola realized that his pay had not increased much and his health had deteriorated over the years. He felt "old" by the age of 25 and decided to return home as "certificates could not be exchanged for money (chuckles)." He was also seeking a different assignment within the same company, some of which were denied to him because of the dangers of the work for unmarried men (danger of impotency from exposure to certain chemicals). So he said to himself "It's time to move on" (January 12, 2020, Kathmandu).

Being able to "move on" is an expression that Bhola used repeatedly. Moving on here represents a range of emotions, mainly an interest in not being physically or emotionally stuck at one place of work. As he said, "Coming back to Nepal after six years of work […] I thought I would easily get another job and move on. But I waited […] for two years." Soon after, at the age of 27 and after appearing for several interviews mediated by recruitment agencies, Bhola was selected for a job as a security guard in the UAE. It was a job with a contracting company that placed foreign recruits as security guards with companies in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Once in Dubai, he was expected to train with the Dubai Police Academy and take a test to prove his competence as a security guard. Those who passed the test and received their certificates were to get a relatively decent pay package of about 2260 dirhams (541.98 euros) a month and those without this certification would only receive the minimum wage of 1200 dirhams (287.73 euros). Bhola was placed with a company in Dubai and he worked there for 9 months doing long hours and suffering heavy penalties for mistakes, until the company went bankrupt and ceased operation. During the period of inactivity that followed, the company stopped paying the workers, who were placed in lodgings and were asked to be patient and wait until the company got another contract. Bhola recalled "I was staying with 35-36 people in one room! It was very difficult to stay like that […] so many people staying in one room […] like goats […] like dogs." He also recalled how, on top of the extreme heat, poor ventilation, and cramped lodgings, men would often get into brawls and violent fights as a result of the enforced sharing of space and the frustration of not working or being paid for over 9 months. Many wanted to leave the country and go back but the employers kept promising them that the company was about to revive its operations. Quite a few workers left the country anyway. Bhola recollected that he was perhaps one of the last to leave the company lodgings.

Bhola's reluctance to go back to Nepal was not a result of his patience, he said. He was embarrassed to go home without money. Towards the end of his 7 months of waiting, he also had to borrow 1 lakh rupee (1,172.64 euros) from his "ageing parents" and felt very guilty for this. "I should be the one sending them money every month and I had to borrow from them," he said with remorse. Shame and the fear of facing his parents without money made Bhola stay much longer than his counterparts. After waiting for 9 months, the company representative told Bhola that he should return as the company was not likely to recruit workers. He was angry but he did not resist. He merely asked them to pay his dues for the months he had actually worked. "I didn't question them, ask them anything or complain. I just thought 'no need to figure (this) out […] just move on. Just get the experience and move on,'" he said.

"Moving on" here also implies a willingness to be flexible and have fewer rigid expectations of work, an employer or life in general. Being trained in waiting table and having had the initial desire to work in the hospitality industry, Bhola had been trained in a wide range of occupations from pest control management to security and patrolling. Far from being "unskilled," Bhola had undergone skill training in different industries and was willing to be trained in more fields. "Moving on" for him meant not having rigid career expectations and being prepared for and grabbing whatever career opportunity that was available. He was, at the time of the interview, working in a forest reserve as a daily wage laborer helping out in the kitchen and administration in Nepal "for the time being" until he found another foreign employment contract. Fluid aspirations and flexible career trajectories define the need to move on for Bhola and others with similar experiences.

Moving on here also represents impatience with waiting for the "right job" and points towards a willingness to stay mobile to meet the gendered and normative expectations of his immediate family that come with the process of migration. Lack of suitable employment opportunities and rampant unemployment in Nepal leaves him little choice and puts him in a perpetual cycle of mobility. Mobility here is not just aspirational but a compulsion; the only way to earn money in a dignified way. Speaking of times of unemployment at home, he said

> It affects you. Your family also […] and also your society sees you in a different way if you don't earn. If you are young and don't have a job, stay at home, people comment […] people talk. People say "your ageing mother and father are working and you are staying home."

Being a son in South Asia, he is expected to be the provider and to take care of his parents. Bhola spoke of disappointing his family and having had suicidal thoughts during times of prolonged waiting for jobs. He was determined to "keep moving" and said

> I have to continuously move [to other places to earn. To also make my parents feel that their son is not *faltu* [useless]. There may be many problems [in the destination country] […] But at least you will be away […] from your family,

> [yet] send them some money. Even if you work hard, spend less, work overtime, you still send money and make them happy. If you are at home, no one will respect you, your mind will also be dull. Then negative thoughts come to you(r) mind.

Bhola blamed his luck for his prolonged waiting period and inability to keep getting good jobs abroad but he was sure that he had "to move on […] and not stay […] in one place" (January 12, 2020, Kathmandu).

Bhola's experience of cross-border migration has been interrupted by several periods of waiting, uncertainty and insecurity. His narrative shows that, given the precarious nature of transnational employment, especially in low-skilled occupational categories, waiting does not end with the point of departure. Waiting is something that migrant workers have to encounter at different points in their migratory experience, both in the domicile as well as in the destination. Seeing his inability to uninterruptedly provide for his family, Bhola views these periods of uncertainty as failure; failure to be the family's breadwinner and to meet society's gendered and normative expectations. Adapting to these phases of uncertainty, and developing "moving on" as a mechanism of coping, Bhola insists on building flexibility into his approach to work and life; epitomizing neoliberal subjectivity. This view of waiting as failure also sheds light on the general sense of unease and agitation that circular migrant workers experience, making them confront their uncertain reality with a literal as well as figurative urge to "keep moving."

Waiting as an investment

Migrants' narratives also bring to the fore another interesting facet of waiting as experienced during *baideshik rojgar*. The whole period of foreign employment, or of perceived productivity as a result of mobility, is itself sometimes viewed as an extended period of waiting wherein the time spent away from family and home is considered the wait—a wait to return back home, to the final destination. Contrary to what some scholars have noted with regard to local circular migrants viewing home itself as a waiting room before getting back to work (Bremen 2020), some of the Nepali migrant workers I spoke to shared how the period of employment itself is seen as the wait, time to be spent on investing in the future and paying back accumulated debts. This narrative shows that in the lives of circular migrant workers, the ideas of home and destination are often blurred and what one views as *the wait* depends on what one is waiting for: mobility or stability.

In the context of heavy recruitment fees paid to obtain contractual foreign employment, debt procured to meet expenses both within and outside Nepal, the hardships of working overtime and under stressful conditions, the physical and emotional loss experienced during mobility, and having to be away from family for most of their working lives, some migrants consider the time away from home as time for investment towards a better future in Nepal. Hard-earned money is meticulously saved to provide for oneself and one's family. In the absence of state-

instituted social security and welfare cover, as in most South Asian countries, migrants find that responsibility for health, education and social provisions such as income after retirement fall on their shoulders. The period of waiting in this context is a period of hardship and sacrifice that is seen as an investment towards a better life after settling down.

Rajpal (pseudonym), a 37-year-old migrant, provided insights into how migrants tend to view the period of employment abroad as an extended period of waiting to return to home, a time perceived as an investment for the wellbeing of one's family. Although only approaching his 40s, Rajpal's weary eyes and overall fatigued demeanor made him look much older than his age, something he claimed was a result of decades of *baideshik rojgar*. During his last contract for a six-year period of work in Malaysia in a garment factory, Rajpal managed to save enough money to build a house in his village in Nepal, albeit to an unfinished state. He had requested that his employer grant him three months' holiday in early 2020 to finish his house. He had been sending money to his wife on a regular basis to make sure the construction was underway before he arrived in Nepal after several years of foreign employment. Although he had hoped that the construction of the house would be finished by the end of his stay and that he could return to his place of employment, the construction had to be left incomplete because the family had run out of funds. He said

> It's not finished yet. I mean from the outside it's done, the structure is erect. But the inside […] plastering is not done. Before that my money ran out. At first, I spent the money on land, then the building. My money ran out, didn't have any left for plaster. But we can still stay inside, that is not a problem.

He had also been providing for his children's education at the same time. He insisted on sending them to private boarding schools rather than to tuition fee-free government schools. He said,

> In government schools there is no control on education […] it's bad. It's expensive in boarding school […] 7000 NPR (54.94 USD) per month, for both [children]. It is a lot but at least we know the kids are learning […] and they will get a good job in 10-15 years.

In order to invest in the future, he did not hesitate to work overtime when in Malaysia and limit his "indulgence" in alcohol and marijuana, which his fellow migrants sometimes urged him to. He took a loan from a local moneylender for the house and it required around 9 months to pay it off. The agricultural land and the cattle his family owned in their village did not yield a profit and were used only for consumption. The only way for him to make sure he "had a roof over his head" when he retired and his children were educated and prepared to take over his role as the household's breadwinners, was for him to use his time away from his family as an investment.

Image 4: A Nepali migrant returning from Malaysia with gifts for his family. The name of the migrant worker is obscured for anonymity

Source: Photograph taken by the author, 15-02-2020, Kathmandu. CC BY-SA 4.0.

At the time of our meeting in early 2020, Rajpal was visiting Nepal after three years of work. He, like many young Nepali men returning from employment abroad, was really looking forward to visiting his family and friends after a few years of separation. The return of the migrant worker after the end of a contract is characterized by a sense of heightened excitement to be back home after 2-3 years and a desire to perform one's uplifted status as a result of the mobility. This starts right at the airport arrival gate in Kathmandu. Many migrants can be seen arriving well dressed, carrying neatly packed gifts for their friends and families (see Image 4). As someone returning from *bidesh* or a foreign land, the expectations of people around them are high. As Rajpal said

> Everyone expects something from you when you come home […] They […] my children, my wife, my wife's three sisters, my father, my brother's children, his family, everyone calls me a month or so before coming to Nepal and they will tell me "*baba* will you get a torch for me, will you get a jacket for me, will you get a mobile for me" (smiles). My wife called last time and said "I want that electric rice cooker, bring that for me. Also get makeup products […] Nepali ones are no good" (laughs). I visit only once in three years, so it's possible. I bring luggage of 40-50kg. I bring things like LCD (TV), clothes, rice cooker […] (chuckles) (February 20, 2020, Kathmandu).

But once home and once the excitement of visiting, sharing their experiences abroad, and gift giving ends, a gradual restlessness sets in. As an aspirant migrant in their mid-30's said

> "At first when you come […] for a month or so, it will be fun. Everyone will ask for you, everyone will take care of you, it's all nice. Slowly it gets […] tasteless. As long as you stay abroad […] send them money regularly […] people love you. If you have spare money in your pocket, people are nice to you. Even if you had to go through hell to get that money […] it doesn't matter. People see only money […] not how it came. So, its best if you are abroad […] money in the bank account […] send money to family once a month or once in two months and meet them in 2-3 years with some gifts, everyone loves you.

After a few months of being back home, the workers tend to re-start the process of contacting a local agent, waiting for a vacancy, going to Kathmandu, getting in touch with an agency, waiting for an interview, getting their paperwork done and getting ready to bid farewell to their families again, creating a long and repetitive cycle of being at home and being away for work. The restlessness to get "moving" creeps in after only a few days of being back. But Rajpal, like Bhola, is not inflexible about his ambitions and merely wants to be on the move when he can. He knows that the only way for him to provide for his family and earn their respect is by staying away for work and making occasional visits, but other than that, he leaves it to fate to determine where he goes or what he does. As Rajpal calmly stated,

> My wife says "You are old now […] you are getting old. You still don't send much money home. You should change your job […] get something else that pays more." Maybe I will see, but I am also okay with this garment work. If I don't get anything […] in Nepal, India, Malaysia, anywhere, I will land up somewhere according to my fate, where fate leads me […] I will *time-pass* there (February 20, 2020, Kathmandu).

Employment and periods of activity themselves thus become periods of "time-pass" and serve as waiting rooms for the occasional, and eventually permanent, return home.

Conclusion

"As the reserve army of labour returns home or hangs around movie theatres without a job for the day, the politics of social labour are all to do with why and how flexible workers wait for the next insecure job" (Chari 2004, 76). By disentangling the act of waiting itself, this research note has shown how waiting is multiple and mutable, and is deeply intertwined with the mediation of cross-border mobility that makes migration procedural and convoluted (Lindquist and Xiang 2018). When the casualization of employment relationships is more of a norm than an exception and when employment contracts for low-skilled, discardable migrant workers do not last for more than two–three years, throwing light on the time in-between contracts becomes highly relevant. Also relevant is how these migrants are "permanently temporary" and how their access to social protection is greatly restricted in the countries of both origin and destination, forcing them to be "continually circular" (Baas 2018) and to design a lifestyle around constant moving and waiting.

This research note has shown the different tonalities of the experience of waiting as part of transnational migration, disturbing our idea of a unilateral flow of cross-border mobility. The rhythms of waiting and moving—of work, application, detention, waiting lists, transit, prolongation and extension, etc., deeply condition the experience of transnational migration. This research note has pointed out that the period of waiting and uncertainty is not restricted to moments of anticipation before departure. Waiting is also encountered during the migratory phase as well as during periods of employment abroad, blurring our preconceived notions of what is "home" and what is not. While waiting, migrant workers experience a number of emotions and intentions such as anticipation, longing, restlessness and finally of surrendering to the wait and letting go. Instead of equating waiting with inactivity, these migrants' narratives also show that waiting is experienced beyond the binary distinction of activity/inactivity and the positioning of migrants with respect to perceptions of time and productivity differs from one experience to another. Yet these are not isolated experiences and, while migrants stand together on the street corners of Kathmandu or share a meal or a *chiyā* (tea) in former migrant-run canteens and food stalls, social meanings of waiting are constructed and processed. Of course, the narratives shared here were from right before the pandemic, which later highlighted the fragility of the global migration order and further generated immense uncertainty and insecurity among migrants across the world. While this research note is only a prelude to a larger discussion on migration and migrant subjectivities, future work in this direction can explore pandemic-induced immobility as experienced by both migrants and migration brokers and can investigate immobility as an embodied, visceral experience, as well as examine its implications on gendered and racialized bodies. Developing our understanding of the interaction between migrant subjectivities and migration trajectories, studies

could also look into perceptions of time in circular migration regimes and the governance of short-term migrant contracts.

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