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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/poldev/3077>

DOI: 10.4000/poldev.3077

ISSN: 1663-9391

Publisher

Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

ISBN: 978-2-940600-11-3

ISSN: 1663-9375

Brought to you by Université de Genève / Graduate Institute / Bibliothèque de Genève



Electronic reference

Antonio Donini, « Social Suffering and Structural Violence: Nepali Workers in Qatar », *International Development Policy | Revue internationale de politique de développement* [Online], 11 | 2019, Online since 07 May 2019, connection on 26 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/poldev/3077> ; DOI : 10.4000/poldev.3077

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Social Suffering and Structural Violence: Nepali Workers in Qatar

Antonio Donini

In a run-down area of downtown Doha—a neighbourhood that will be demolished to make place for the gleaming new city that will host the FIFA World Cup in 2022—we visited three young boys from the Langtang area who were camping on the roof of a derelict hostel for migrant workers. They had arrived in Qatar two months earlier and found that their working conditions, salary, and accommodation were not what they had been promised. They had protested, and their sponsor had thrown them out on the street with no salary, no exit permit and no passport. They were surviving thanks to canned food and other items provided by an unofficial Nepali self-help group and some foreign benefactors. They had no money (and had taken out large loans from moneylenders in their village) and no way of leaving Qatar. The Nepali embassy had been approached but seemed ineffective in addressing the case. They were stuck. Getting exit papers was going to take time. They were dirty, tired, depressed and hopeless. When asked what would happen when, eventually, they would make their way back to Nepal, they said that in addition to the loss of face of having been unsuccessful in their migration attempt, they would somehow have to pay back NPR 120,000 to NPR 160,000 (USD 1,070 to USD 1,425) each. The only solution

would be for their family to sell whatever land they still had (Fieldnotes, Donini, Doha, December 2012; see Figure 9.1).

1. Introduction

- 1 Over the past 20 years Nepal has undergone many transformations: from war to relative peace, from monarchy to a putative democratic system, from the rigidities of a mainly rural, caste-based social structure to more rural-urban or 'rurban' world views based on social and geographical mobility, from marginalisation to gradual integration into the regional processes of globalisation. This process of change has been particularly significant in rural Nepal. The political economy, especially in the Middle Hills, has undergone a significant transformation that has resulted in the gradual weakening of traditional forms of bonded and caste-based division of labour. The vectors of change that Polanyi applied to his analysis of the 'Great Transformation' that accompanied the industrial revolution in Europe provide a useful lens with which to understand social change in Nepal (Donini et al., 2013; Polanyi, 2001). These vectors involve the commodification of land, labour and money, which previously were embedded in social relationships rather than functions of the market. In rural Nepal, land used to be where people worked, and labour was what they did. Bonded or exchange-based forms of labour rather than cash transactions were how one eked out a livelihood. Now, even remote areas of rural Nepal have witnessed a change from a relatively static situation of social reproduction to one where land and labour are increasingly bought and sold and where the market economy and globalised economic and social processes (communications, migration, remittances) have rapidly taken hold.

A consequence of this transformation is the transition of rural livelihoods from exclusively agricultural and land-based to more fluid systems that involve mobility and cash. These systems include, for example, day-labour on someone else's farm, building or road construction work in the same valley, internal migration to work in brick kilns in the Kathmandu valley or as domestic workers, seasonal migration to India, sponsored and somewhat regulated migration to the Gulf countries, Malaysia, South Korea and sometimes beyond. The common characteristic of these forms of livelihoods is that they are 'modern' in the sense that they are cash-based and often exploitative but also because of the aspiration of young people, who no longer feel straight-jacketed in the caste system, to escape the village in order to lead a more 'modern life'. For many young people, both men and women, staying in the village is tantamount to being labelled as *faltu* (useless) and leaving is a kind of rite of passage (Donini et al., 2013, 41; Sharma, 2013; Monsutti, 2007). These aspirations are often sorely dashed, as we shall see in the case of Nepali migrants in Qatar.

Although the shift from *fields* to *cities* constitutes a shift from *subjects* to *citizens*, the movement away from the rural and agrarian sectors has not been free of structural violence and social suffering. This movement has not been one of *unfreedom* to *freedom* (Sharma & Donini, 2012). Poorer migrants have very little social or legal protection, and are often the victims of various forms of exploitation. Although experiences and working conditions vary, most work in the domestic informal sector remains under-monitored, under-regulated, casualised and without access to any official social protection whatsoever. Officially sanctioned migration to Qatar or other Gulf countries

is highly organised but equally exploitative. Both types of migration rely initially on informal networks of agents and brokers at the village level that are often based on family or kinship relationships. 'Regulated' external migration relies on sophisticated and highly exploitative chains of intermediaries that link the village to the destination. One of the paradoxes of migration, whether internal or international, is that it offers both freedom and unfreedom. Embarking on a journey to paid employment has certainly offered income opportunities to Nepali women who otherwise would be largely excluded from the labour market. This has challenged the stereotypical representation of women as unproductive and contributed to financial gains and some empowerment. However, the nature of domestic work as maids or carers reinforces gendered ideas of work. The status of domestic workers moving to Kathmandu or other cities, and even more so in the Gulf, makes women vulnerable to downward social mobility, discrimination, and abuse including sexual exploitation. For men, in destinations such as Qatar, while there are opportunities for increased income, these are erratic and do not necessarily lead to upward mobility. Debt entrapment looms large as does loss of face vis-à-vis family and community if the migration is not, or is not perceived as, successful. In addition, masculinity issues arise in the all-male environment of the labour camp where sexuality is highly constrained and there are little or no opportunities to meet young Nepali women (migration of Nepalis to Qatar is over 90 per cent male). As in other migration situations the lure of a better life is high and while the risks are well known, they are played down or ignored.

Moreover, migrant labourers are subjected to both visible and invisible forms of violence, punishment, whimsical treatment, including discrimination and humiliation and, of course, exploitative contractual arrangements. These are often accompanied by forced compliance with arbitrary norms if not stripping the migrant of his or her identity (the confiscation of the migrant worker's passport on arrival in the Gulf is highly symbolic of the status of unfreedom).

What we have here is another paradox: the persistence of a kind of postmodern feudalism, in a highly globalised context among populations that—wittingly or not—are aspiring to escape the rigours of the caste system. Bonded labour is alive and well in Qatar, the country with the world's highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita... but only for Qataris. Behind Qatar's glistening facade, modernity, segregation and forced labour coexist and support each other (Qatar ranks fifth on the world slavery index¹). As we shall see below, in the hyper-globalised, genetically re-engineered society of Qatar, these unfreedoms are functional to the economic strategies of the state.

A third paradox is that migration, in addition to being *gendered* is also *classed*. Migration and wage labour have led to contradictory class mobility—that is to say, while migration has certainly opened up opportunities for cash income, the nature of work and working conditions have often resulted in dislocation, humiliation, debt entrapment, social suffering and structural violence. While increasing numbers of men seek to assert their masculinity through labour mobility, both in the form of earnings and wider experience beyond village life, this does not automatically translate into an affirmation of identity. Many migrants struggle to save money to reimburse their debt and, especially when the migration experience fails because the conditions in Qatar or in other destination countries turn out to be more exploitative than expected, psychological trauma compounds the economic trauma. As mentioned above, migration is consubstantial with the weakening of the caste system and the

penetration, into the remotest areas, of ‘modernity’ in the form of the capitalist system and its corollary wage-based labour relations, which are ‘dis-attached’ from the old production, property and social relations regime (Mishra, 2007, 23). Some have argued that a class lens would be more adequate to capture the situation of marginal migrants than the caste-ethnicity-rural-urban lens that is more frequently applied (Bruslé, 2010; Mishra, 2007; Sharma, 2016).

- 2 Caste is hardly a factor in migration. Trans-caste or class factors such as youth and the ability to raise the necessary resources are better predictors of migration. At the point of destination, caste is further diluted; Nepalis tend to self-identify as a group rather than by caste or ethnicity. Bruslé (2010) makes a convincing case that the spatial segregation found in places like Qatar—‘a land of control and separation’—where migrants’ lives are strongly conditioned by the multiple hierarchies and divisions they encounter, is more about class than nationality or occupation. In fact, it could be said that the waves of young Nepalis who accept the risks inherent in recurrent labour migration constitute an emerging class, albeit one without class-consciousness.

Our ethnographic work (and that of others, including Bruslé (2010 and 2012)) confirms that this class is caught in a kind of vice: it is still mentally attached to the village, and most migrants identify as rural from a particular area when asked. But at the same time it is part of a global exploitative system that rarely allows individual migrants to ‘break into’ modernity. The absence of the state compounds the exploitation. The Nepali state simultaneously benefits from migration—remittances represent 20 to 25 per cent of GDP (Mishra, 2007)—and migration also functions as a safety valve that reduces social tension. But at the same time, the state takes little responsibility for the well-being of its migrants. While the Nepal-Qatar migration corridor is formally regulated by an interstate agreement that defines the numbers and duration of migration, the Nepali government is unable or unwilling to intervene other than in the most extreme cases of exploitation. The web of manpower agencies that are the obligatory entry point for aspiring migrants are essentially exploitation-promoting, money-making business that easily evade control and accountability. Family, kinship and the presence of small Nepali migrant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating more or less under the radar in Qatar provide limited protection and some sense of belonging. Until recently, pressure by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and NGOs has been equally ineffective in ensuring compliance with international regulatory mechanisms although this seems to be changing at the time of writing (see end of this chapter). Thus, the gap between the aspiration towards personal freedom and *bikas* (development) and the reality of the structural violence that accompanies the migrant at all steps along the journey from the village to the unfreedoms of Qatar is at the heart of the human condition of 400,000 or so Nepalis, to which we now turn.

Figure 9.1 Nepali boys who left their jobs, camping on rooftop, Doha, December 2012



Credits: Antonio Donini.

2. Nepalis in the ‘Brave New World’ of Qatar²

After traveling thousands of miles, [migrants] said they had little choice but to accept work they had not agreed to perform, and unsatisfactory conditions and practices that included employers withholding wages (typically as security to prevent them from quitting), illegal wage deductions, or salaries far below those promised. Some said they signed contracts under coercive circumstances, while others never saw an employment contract at all (HRW, 2012).

- 3 The exploitative conditions under which approximately two million migrant workers live and work in Qatar have been well described both in the academic literature and in the work of human rights organisations, the international trade union movement and the ILO (see for example HRW, 2012; Amnesty International, 2016a and b; Harroff-Tavel and Nasri, 2013; ITUC, 2015). While some Gulf States—Kuwait for example—have abolished the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, Qatar has only recently responded to international pressure. Legal and other measures were announced at the end of 2017 by the Qatar authorities to address the most glaring issues of exploitation but falling short of the abolition of the *kafala* system (HRW, 2017). Pressure from international human rights groups, the international trade union movement and the ILO has been somewhat successful in bringing about these changes. The potential reputational damage resulting from exposure in the context of the preparations for the 2022 World Cup has

probably had a more important role in these changes. Whether and how the fundamentals of an organised forced labour system will change is too early to tell. The following paragraphs provide a snapshot of the human condition of Nepali migrants in Qatar in late 2012. Our findings resonate with those of similar studies, whether ethnographic (Bruslé, 2010 and 2012) or advocacy related such as reports by Human Rights Watch (2012 and 2017) and Amnesty International (2016b).

Qatar has a population of close to 2.6 million of which some 90 per cent are migrants.³ Nepali migrants total about 400,000 and constitute the largest single contingent of foreign workers.⁴ The majority of migrants work in construction: hundreds of thousands of workers are needed to fulfil Qatar's ambitious objectives, both economic and linked to the projection of its visibility and power. These two objectives come together in the enormous construction projects that are remodelling the city of Doha in view of the 2022 World Cup.

By negotiating state-to-state agreements with Nepal, Bangladesh, India and other South Asian countries, as well as the Philippines, for the provision of large contingents of unskilled or semi-skilled labour, Qatar has created a kind of genetically engineered society in which migrants constitute the expendable labour force that is functional to the production of the wealth and power of those—the small minority of Qatari families and the small elite of foreign managers—who rule from the top of the pyramid. As in Huxley's dystopia, the pyramid is stratified, and because the various layers have different interests, there is little opportunity for solidarity or the expression of grievances across layers. Moreover, because all migration is temporary—a maximum of 2–3 years for Nepalis, after which a 2-year break is mandatory, except for a small layer of managers (south Indians, Palestinians, nationals of other Gulf countries) who are allowed to stay longer—the Qatari state has little concern for the long-term stability of the pyramid. The migration tap can be turned on or off at will and layers or groups that are no longer required can be easily phased out with minimal risk to stability. The Nepali contingent, mostly young, unskilled and over 90 per cent male is at the bottom of the pyramid and is the most disadvantaged, exploited, and discriminated against.

2.1 Complexity of Labour Arrangements

- 4 Migration to Qatar is based on the *kafala* system, which reflects the practices of control and exclusion of migrants. There are two main types of sponsorship arrangements:
- (a) The regulated system based on an agreement between the governments of Qatar and Nepal allows for a certain quota of Nepalis to migrate to Qatar each year. This involves a multilayered set of intermediaries that start with family or kinship at the village level. Agents, who are sometimes family members, identify potential migrants. These agents work for manpower agencies in Kathmandu, which provide a number of services: basic induction, health check, required paperwork, and the identification of a *kapil* (sponsor, a Qatari national) and a *mudir* (manager, usually a migrant from one of the higher layers of the pyramid) in Qatar. A contract is drawn up specifying work conditions and salary; a passport and ticket as well as an exit permit from Nepal and a visa for Qatar are also provided by the agency. Contracts are normally in English and are only handed over to the migrant at the last moment, for example at Kathmandu international airport on the day of departure. All this comes at a cost for the migrant and his family. Typically, aspiring migrants are required to pay approximately NPR 150,000 (or approx. USD 1,400) for these services and spend a variable amount of time—

from a few days to several weeks—in guesthouses or small hotels in Kathmandu before receiving their marching orders. Repeated visits to Kathmandu may be required before the documents are finalised. In some cases the process is aborted by the manpower agency or the sponsor. In theory, manpower agencies are obliged to protect the migrant from excessive costs and if contractual arrangements are not respected or are overly exploitative, to arrange for the return of the migrant, at their cost, to his or her village. In practice, the manpower agency is reluctant to do so or does so only as a last resort. Most migrants need to take out loans to cover the agency fees and other expenses. Loan rates are extortionate and seem to be usually around 36 per cent/year, sometimes up to 50 per cent/year. Debt can quickly become an unsustainable burden, especially if things do not go as planned. Migrants suffer from extreme pressure to succeed so that the debts to family or moneylenders can be repaid.⁵

(b) The so-called ‘free visa’ system whereby a migrant already working in Qatar identifies a potential *mudir* and a work opportunity and contacts an interested potential migrant—usually a family member or someone from the same village. This bypasses the manpower agency and is therefore much cheaper for the sponsor. However, the aspiring migrants often have to pay for their own ticket. If the migrant leaves via India, the process also bypasses the quota system and can be faster. The risks for the migrant are greater, as the agreement is not recorded, and even the minimal protection afforded by the manpower agency is absent. There are many instances of migrants who are ‘invited’ by a family member or friend, only to find that they have been tricked into a predicament that bears no relation to the conditions that were promised. Because the *mudir* typically pays a fee to the migrant who ‘invites’ a family member, there is an in-built incentive to trick a newcomer into coming.

There is also a third way: (c) Illegal entry into Qatar with a tourist visa. This is sometimes the route chosen by female migrants who go there to work as maids or carers (Nepal no longer allows female migrants under 30 years of age to go to Qatar legally) and by young men who go on the off chance that they will be allowed entry. The risks are high because entering on a tourist visa requires evidence of a return ticket, sufficient cash, as well as a contact address in Qatar. Those who enter illegally tend to lead a precarious existence, may be subjected to physical violence by their employers and face immediate deportation if caught by the police.

Few skilled Nepali labourers make it to Qatar; the vast majority of Nepalis who work there are unskilled and work in construction or, to a lesser extent, in agriculture. The few semi-skilled labourers work as taxi drivers or hotel workers.

2.2 Exploitation

- 5 Push and pull factors combine in the decision to migrate: poverty, the semi-feudal labour arrangements in the agricultural sector, the fact that the caste system has weakened and that feudal arrangements have collapsed because landowners have brought farm machinery and require less manual labour. Family pressure (real or presumed) and the aspiration for change and a better life, on one side, and the role of agents who scour the countryside looking for potential migrants, on the other, also play an important role. Many aspiring migrants have heard both positive and negative stories of ‘what happens’. They have seen migrants return and build a *pakka* (brick and concrete) house; but they have also heard of bad experiences where families have been unable to repay their debts and have been forced to sell their land. Some claim that

they were genuinely ignorant of the exploitative conditions they would find. Overall, the lure is strong, and aspiring migrants tend to brush aside the risks or block them from their minds and hope for the best.

Whether the overall experience is a positive one or not, there is a widespread sense among migrants of 'being owned'. Once they step out of Doha International Airport, migrants become totally dependent on their employer for their survival and well-being. Their interface is the *mudir*, usually a migrant himself, who manages labourers on behalf of the employer (usually a Qatari national). Migrants are dependent on their *mudir* for everything: working and living conditions, payment of salary, ensuring their legal status (proper ID and visa), access to healthcare, as well as permission to change jobs and the financing of their return ticket home. This set-up creates the basis for exploitation, which starts with the confiscation of the migrant's passport upon arrival. Though illegal as per Qatari law, this is the norm for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. As one migrant put it, 'The first thing that happens is that your identity is taken away from you'. The sense of bondage becomes apparent when, in many cases, migrants realise that their working conditions and salary are much inferior to what was promised (and their contract states), that they cannot change employer or job unless the employer agrees to sign a release waiver, and that they cannot leave the country without an exit permit, the withholding of which is used to pressure migrants to accept under-par conditions.

Figure 9.2 Migrant living conditions at labour camp, outskirts of Doha



Credits: Antonio Donini.

- 6 Effectively, many migrants become caught in a vice: they are forced to accept these living conditions (see Figure 9.2) because challenging the system is difficult, costly, time-consuming, and of uncertain outcome. Debt entrapment, family pressure, and the

potential loss of face of being considered '*faltu*' (useless) upon return to the village conspire to force migrants to comply. When conditions become abusive or unbearable, the only available option is to run away (which is illegal) and seek employment directly with another *mudir* (which is doubly illegal). The boundaries between illegal and licit fluctuate: for the *mudir* the advantage of recruiting a runaway migrant is that he does not need to pay for healthcare, the renewal of the visa, and the cost of the return ticket if the migrant is caught by the police. Moreover, the risks incurred by the *mudir* are minimal, as labour laws protect employers and are seldom enforced in favour of migrants. Such illegal arrangements are sought after by employers in need of greater numbers of workers than the 'official' system can provide. Sometimes, despite the obvious risks of deportation and lack of access to services, such arrangements can work to the advantage of the migrant, as the relationship is more freely entered into than the sponsorship system and pay can be moderately higher. Less bondage, but more insecurity.

Generally speaking, larger employers—and especially the huge construction companies that are part-owned by reputable international companies—provide more predictable and decent working and living conditions than small employers. Some of the worst forms of exploitation occur for migrants who are recruited by service companies (i.e. companies that provide unskilled labour to larger companies), as the demand for workers fluctuates and the service company is often unwilling or unable to pay salaries on time or invest in proper living quarters for its workers.

Figure 9.3 Nepali workers on a farm north of Doha, December 2012



Credits: Antonio Donini.

A visit to a farm in the desert some 50 km NW of Doha provides a more nuanced picture than the urban big company and big camp situation. The farm produces vegetables for 7-8 months per year when the weather is reasonably cool. In the hottest months agriculture is impossible but there are chickens and cows to tend.

The owner of the farm is Qatari. He has invested in huge water pumps that drain the aquifer. The farm is modern. The living quarters are adequate (with 5-6 migrants per room). There are many shaded areas for outdoor activities. The owner is seldom seen but there is a Palestinian manager who lives on the farm with his family. It is a Friday, there is less work to do and the atmosphere is relaxed. The manager is chatty and offers us fresh slices of melon. Some of the migrants are playing cards, others are repainting their living quarters. Some are chatting via Skype, presumably to their families. After a visit to fields and animal pens, we speak to a couple of Nepali migrants. A 34-year-old man says: 'I have been working here for nine years. My initial salary was QAR 400/month (USD 110). Now I earn QAR 1,050 (USD 290) plus some overtime. We get free accommodation and food. We work eight hours per day and usually 1.5 h overtime. Less so in the extremely hot summer months. When there is more work to be done, the manager hires some 'illegals' who have usually run away from construction jobs. They come because conditions are better here. There is not much risk of being caught and the manager ensures they get healthcare. There are 21 Nepalis working on the farm, 3 Bangladeshis and 3 Indians. All have more or less the same pay. The Indians get a bit more (because of a better agreement negotiated between India and Qatar). I send all my salary back home—except for my mobile phone costs. I go home every 17 months. The manager pays for the trip but I get no salary when I am away. My family wants me to return home but I prefer it here'. A young man disagrees: 'I have been here six months. I am not too happy. I was expecting better. I had to take out an NPR 80,000 loan from the village money lender at a 50 per cent per annum rate. I am never going to be able to pay this back. My wife has just had a baby. I will have to surrender my land to the money lender.' (Donini, fieldnotes, desert farm north of Doha, December 2012; see Figure 9.3).

2.3 Grievances

- 7 Because of the weakness of the Nepali state's negotiating position compared to other more 'organised' states such as India or the Philippines, the 2005 Nepal-Qatar migration framework agreement results in low protection and significant exploitation of Nepali migrants.⁶ The resolution of disputes is particularly difficult because all claims need to be submitted to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs while the Nepali embassy in Doha can only communicate via Note Verbale to the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As mentioned, sponsorship agreements are often arbitrary and constitute a modern version of bonded labour, if not slavery. In our interviews we were confronted with a catalogue of grievances and only very few instances of relatively acceptable conditions. The most common issues were:
 - Working conditions and salary do not correspond to the written contract and late payment of salary (sometimes months in arrears). Just one example: a security guard was promised USD 330/month (QAR 1,200 /month) and a food allowance for eight hours work/day but received only USD 275 (QAR 1,000), no food, and was forced to work 12 hours/day.
 - The withholding of the exit permit by the *mudir* as a way of putting pressure on the migrant to stay. Or the refusal of the *mudir* to process the annual visa extension that is essential in order to get an ID card, access to healthcare and the exit permit.
- 8 Other issues noted were a lack of dignity in the workplace, abusive treatment by the Qatari authorities and the state of the accommodation provided, which is often cramped with sometimes a dozen of migrants to a room.

The expression of grievances is met with threats to withdraw ID cards or even sponsorship itself (without the agreement of the sponsor, and the identification of a

new one, it is not possible to change jobs). In theory, workers who are dissatisfied with their jobs have the option of asking the Nepali manpower agency to repatriate them within three months of their arrival but this is difficult for a number of reasons: the reluctance of the manpower agency to cover the costs, the withholding by the sponsor of those papers necessary for obtaining an exit permit, and the reluctance of individual migrants to return home and confront loss of face and onerous debt repayment. As a result, many migrants run away. According to one source, there may be up to 20,000 to 30,000 Nepali ‘escapees’ who lack legal documents and have either found alternative employment illegally or are living under the radar with meagre support from former co-workers or small Nepali charity associations.

One young man was particularly vocal in his animosity towards the manpower agency in Kathmandu that had recruited him: ‘I am a former soldier. I have fought the insurgency and killed people. When I go back I will kill three more: the lady at the manpower agency and her two bosses’. He had taken out an NPR 60,000 (USD 535) loan that he was unable to pay back in full. The interest was 36 per cent per year. ‘It would have been better for me to stay home and raise buffaloes.’ (Donini, fieldnotes, Doha, December 2012).

2.4 Recourse/Redress

- 9 When migrants seek redress for exploitative conditions, the odds are stacked against them. The expression of grievances or complaints is ignored or met with hostility. Instances of workers simply being kicked out by their employer for protesting against working or living conditions abound. They find themselves in limbo—no job, no money, no exit permit. The vignette at the beginning of this chapter illustrates a typical case. In theory, complaints can be addressed by migrants to the Qatar Labour Department, but the decisions of the department are often ignored by *mudirs*. Many do not bother to show up when summoned. Complainants can also go to the courts, but this is expensive, can take months, and is of uncertain outcome. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the *mudir* will comply with the decisions of the court. The only other avenue of redress is via the Nepali embassy (see Figure 9.4), but it is understaffed if not under-committed, and its leverage with the authorities is minimal. Practically, the labour attaché can call the *mudir* informally and advocate on the migrant’s behalf or invite the *mudir* to come to the embassy for a meeting. As the latter is under no obligation to comply, this often fails. In more serious cases, the embassy writes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as by law it cannot contact the Labour Department directly, to request an interview with the department. This can take months to arrange, and the outcome is by no means certain. Eventually, problems get solved when the department releases an exit permit—or when a migrant without proper papers is caught by the police and deported. The embassy also deals with the repatriation of the remains of workers who die in industrial accidents or from heat exhaustion or unexplained ‘heart failure’, which can be a euphemism for stress, psychological exhaustion or suicide.⁷

Figure 9.4 Nepali migrants filling out complaint forms, Nepali Embassy, Doha, December 2012



Credits: Sanjay Aryal.

A visit to the Nepali Embassy is instructive. It is in a hot and dusty suburb far from the centre of town. To get there takes a long walk and there is no public transport. Migrants in small groups are hanging around outside and in the courtyard. Shade is at a premium. They have come to bring their complaints to the overworked staff. The ambassador is busy but we speak to the number two. He explains that the role of the embassy is 'very limited'. Individual cases are sometimes easy to solve by speaking to the *mudir*, but when groups of workers are involved, it is more difficult, especially if there has been 'agitation'. 'We tell the boys that they must respect the rules of the country. Sometimes they do things that are not allowed'. One major company went bankrupt and some 80 Nepalis lost their jobs. Salaries were not paid for 4-5 months. The workers were kicked out of the camp with no cash. The embassy tried to collect food and donations from Nepalis. The embassy took the case to the Labour Department but the *mudir* did not show up. They had to pay QAR 500 (USD 137) per person to file the case. It has been dragging on for months. Now, the agreed 'solution' is that the company will repatriate 70 workers but will not pay the salaries they are owed. For the migrants that have nowhere to go, the embassy has a small dormitory—although this is illegal—but it is not big enough. 'In the evening, when the staff leave, we move the furniture and roll out some bedding. Yesterday we had 21 people sleeping here.' (Donini, fieldnotes, Doha, December 2012).

2.5 Resistance

- 10 In our findings, Nepali migrants in Qatar are neither passive victims facing abuse and exploitation nor successful migrants who have been able to take control of their lives. Experiences run the range from the relatively successful to the abominable. Not all *mudirs* are abusive or insensitive to the human condition of migrants. However, the collective identity of Nepalis in Qatar is one of exploitation, discrimination, and loss of

dignity.

How do migrants cope with this situation? Membership of trade unions is not possible for migrants (though Qatari trade unions exist and participate in the ILO tripartite structures), but a variety of small self-help groups set up by migrants themselves or by the Non-resident Nepali Association (NRNA) provide some services, including cash subsidies in extreme cases and assistance regarding repatriation. Nevertheless, there are some everyday forms of resistance. Just as the forms of structural violence these migrants face are subtle although powerful, resistance occurs in the same discreet pattern on an everyday basis (for example, 'work to rule' or deliberate slowdown, absenteeism, unofficial work stoppages, etc.).

Strikes are illegal in Qatar, but this does not mean that they do not happen. A major multinational construction company was obliged to address workers' grievances after a series of unofficial strikes in 2006. Similarly, the main taxi company in Qatar, at which many Nepalis work, had to substantially improve salary and working conditions after a strike in 2011. Qatar needs foreign labour and is mindful of its image: strikes and the visible expulsion of workers do not play well. The fact remains, however, that the protection afforded by worker organisations is minimal. Actions to confront the system are risky, and, because of the layered structure of the migrants' pyramid, the disparate concerns and grievances of the various layers often do not add up. It is easy for employers to 'play' one group or nationality against another, and Nepalis are considered by employers, and by their co-workers of a different nationality, as the bottom level of the pyramid. This also explains why Nepalis are sought-after: they are paid less, complain less, and are seen as hard-working and compliant.

2.6 Masculinity

- 11 Ninety per cent of Nepali migrants in Qatar are male. They are also relatively young, in their twenties, especially the new arrivals who are more subject to exploitation. Older migrants are usually returnee migrants who have achieved improved conditions and some respectability. Some successful migrants, who earn good money, have become *mudirs* and have been allowed to bring their families and have long-term visas. But by and large, migration to Qatar for Nepalis is a young and male affair. This entails considerable emotional suffering (and, presumably, repressed sexuality). Many have left young wives and children back in their villages; others are facing debt entrapment, which precludes them from getting married.

Avenues for socialising between the sexes are extraordinarily limited. Female Nepali migrants work either as maids or as carers; some others are salespeople. Usually their mobility is constrained by tight controls from employers. Male migrants are freer to move around town and tend to congregate on Fridays in a couple of squares, under an underpass to stay away from the scorching heat, or in Nepali restaurants. Moreover, on Fridays access to parks and beaches is reserved for families and women. Men without an accompanying spouse or children/family members are chased away (as the author of this article can attest). This further limits potential interactions between the sexes.

Language and perceived discrimination preclude contact with female migrants of other nationalities (the female Filipino contingent is of quite considerable size) and of course with Qatari women. We did not look into how these frustrations are managed, but we did hear several references to substance abuse: as liquor is not available publicly, some

migrants consume pesticides or low-quality black market liquor, and many do so regularly.

3. Will the Human Condition Improve?

12 A casual visitor travelling by taxi from the airport to the gleaming new skyscrapers of downtown Doha, rushing by the fake ‘Souk’ and the brand-new Museum of Islamic Art designed by I.M. Pei, would certainly notice the massive construction projects—stadiums, conference centres, 5-star hotels—dotting the skyline. But he or she would have no clue as to the social engineering behind the glitzy facade. The ‘camps’ where migrant workers live are conveniently out of sight. Workers are transported by bus to the spatially segregated areas where they live and where they become invisible. As mentioned above, even on their days off they are not allowed to mingle in the parks with the Qatari locals. They meet to chat, smoke, drink and exchange stories of aspiration and exploitation under dusty underpasses, in run-down squares where the sheer number of migrants forces their toleration by the authorities or in small restaurants that cook the food from back home. But in this land of control and separation, segregation is segmented and runs deeper: in addition to being geographical, it is social, cultural and language- and class-based. All aspects of migrants’ daily lives are determined by the multiple divisions they encounter.

Many studies by the international trade union federations, human rights organisations and academics (for example Bruslé, 2010 and 2012; Harroff-Tavel and Nasri, 2013; and ITUC, 2015) have concluded that what Nepali migrants experience in Qatar is forced labour, if not a modern form of slavery.⁷ This has prompted a number of complaints including at the ILO.⁸ But it is worse than that. In one sense, this condition of unfreedom is, at least formally, freely accepted and constitutes a form of self-exploitation. In another sense, structure and agency combine to trap the migrant in a situation from which it is practically impossible to escape. Debt, family pressure to succeed, fear of the shame of failure, exploitation, discrimination and humiliation, make for a descending spiral. The twin metaphors of the ‘camp’ as a site of what Agamben calls the ‘state of exception’ and the ‘bare life’—the biopolitical condition of those who can be ‘expended’—seem apt reminders of what it means to be a migrant today (Agamben, 1998; Bruslé, 2012). The camp has no fence and migrants are ‘free’ to leave their place of work, but in practice the structures of domination make such choices very difficult if not impossible. The spaces where migrants live and work are simultaneously sites of inclusion and exclusion. Nepali migrants are included in, and functional to, the global capitalist system and to Qatar’s role in it. At the same time they are physically excluded from mainstream society and segregated in ‘spaces of exception’ where their lives are considered worthless or expendable.

13 On paper, the labour reforms announced in late 2017 are significant. The Secretary General of the ITUC calls them ‘pathbreaking’: ‘I am confident the kafala system is on its way out in Qatar and that will free two million migrant workers. By the end of March we will have seen the worst of kafala off the agenda and the beginnings of a mature industrial relations structure’ (Harwood, 2018). Besides abolishing the *kafala* system, Qatar also announced other major reforms, including:

14 - The opening of an ILO office (which had long been refused) to oversee reform implementation.

- 15 - A labour tribunal to resolve disputes within three weeks.
- 16 - Contracts to be lodged with the government to prevent substitution.
- 17 - A minimum wage covering all workers, ending the nationality-based system of wages.
- 18 - Residency permits and the elimination of exit visas.
- 19 - Workers free to leave the country, either for home leave or at the end of their contract.
- 20 - A support fund from the government to pay for employees' journey home, after which the authorities would sue employers to get money back.
- 21 - Domestic workers' hours regulated and these workers given a day off each week.

22 Whether these commitments made by Qatar to the ILO and ITUC will be implemented, and if so at what speed, remains to be seen. Some details are still sketchy. For example, a minimum wage is 'prescribed' without stipulating when, at what levels and by whom it will be enforced. A labour inspection policy relying on independent experts is foreseen but no details are provided. As a result of the Qatar announcements, the ILO has withdrawn its complaint against Qatar for non-observance of the Forced Labour Convention. Human Rights organisations have also been generally supportive of the measures announced. Implementation remains key. It is as yet unclear if the reforms are purely cosmetic and aimed at assuaging public opinion in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup or if they will cut deep into the systemic discrimination and structural violence under which migrants in Qatar still labour today. Moreover, it may be that after 2022, the need for migrant labour will peak or even decrease. Dismantling a system predicated on a layered pyramid of workers with different origins and interests will, at best, be a long-haul project.

A larger issue should perhaps be flagged. What does the Nepali experience in Qatar tell us about the future of work and the future of migration? Very unequal power dynamics are at play here. For individual Nepali migrants, the unfreedoms embedded in the current arrangements are both a form of self-exploitation and an aspiration to a better life. For the government of Nepal, there are two obvious benefits: substantial remittances and providing some form of occupation to a possibly restless class of unemployed youth that are still semi-rural but with a rapidly globalising view of the world. Qatar, of course, calls the shots and benefits the most economically, if not in terms of its reputation. But in the longer term? Qatar and the other Gulf States may no longer need large amounts of unskilled labour and might turn the tap off. The problems described in this article may thus wither away as Qatar's globalised economy evolves rather than because of any international pressure or domestic desire to reduce levels of class exploitation in Qatar. This, coupled with processes of tertiarisation, robotisation and uberisation, on the one hand, and demographic pressure in Nepal and elsewhere in South Asia, on the other, could provide a toxic and explosive mix for which migration producing countries in the region are unprepared. The urgent development of a research and policy agenda on how best to accompany and reduce the harmful consequences—for migrants and aspiring migrants—of this transition would seem to be a top priority for Nepal and other South Asian countries. It remains to be seen if the ILO, the ITUC and other international organisations are fit and equipped to provide the necessary gale warnings and advice to navigators on the choppy seas ahead.

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NOTES

1. According to the 2016 World Slavery Index: 'Forced labour in the construction sector is one of the dominant forms of modern slavery in Qatar, reflecting the demand for cheap labour to build extensive infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The ongoing construction of football stadiums, and the huge infrastructure projects required to access and service these locations, continues to see massive influxes of migrant labourers who are vulnerable to abuse. The vast majority of construction workers are low, semi and unskilled. Almost exclusively male (99.4 percent in 2012), they are predominately from South and South East Asian nations—India, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.' See: <https://cdn.globallslaveryindex.org/2018-content/uploads/2018/07/19123316/GSI-2016-Full-Report.pdf> (accessed on 1 September 2018).
2. This section is based on ethnographic work conducted in Nepal (Middle Hills, Terai and Kathmandu Valley), Northern India and Qatar in 2010-12 as part of a research project on perceptions of social transformation and migration. The findings are summarised in Donini et al. (2013). For this chapter, additional materials collected at the time and some updates have been incorporated. The research was conducted at the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, under a grant from the Humanity United Foundation, by a team comprising Jeevan Raj Sharma, Sanjay Aryal and the author. The fieldwork in Qatar was conducted by Sanjay Aryal and the author. All studies are available at fic.tufts.edu. The author expresses his gratitude to the Feinstein Center and to his co-researchers for allowing him to reproduce some of the material here.
3. 2018 estimate. UN population data: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DataQuery/> (accessed on 22 August 2018).
4. There are actually some 650,000 Indian nationals living in Qatar but these include families and not just workers.
5. For a detailed analysis of the functions performed by brokers and agencies, see Kern and Müller-Böcker (2015).
6. The text of the agreement can be found at <https://www.ceslam.org/index.php?pageName=content&contentId=148> (accessed on 18 March 2019).
7. Spot checks and interviews by Sanjay Aryal at Kathmandu airport indicate that 1-2 bodies are repatriated every day.
7. At the 2012 ILO Labour Conference, the Secretary General of the ITUC noted that: 'Working and living conditions for migrant workers in Qatar are modern-day slavery. As it undertakes a massive construction job for the 2022 World Cup, Qatar is putting at risk the lives of thousands of workers. Without genuine legal protection and union rights, more workers will die building the World Cup stadiums than players will play in the World Cup itself.' (Harroff-Tavel and Nasri, 2013, p.116).

8. See the 2014 ILO complaint concerning non-observance by Qatar of the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81) at https://www.ilo.org/gb/GBSessions/GB329/ins/WCMS_546605/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 30 August 2018).

ABSTRACTS

Some 400,000 unskilled and prevalently male Nepali labourers work in Qatar as per an agreement between the governments of the two countries. They are the lowest level of the genetically engineered pyramid of some two million migrant workers that represent some 90 per cent of the resident population in Qatar. The pyramid and the myriad forms of exploitation and discrimination that go with it are functional to Qatar's development agenda and in particular preparations for the 2022 football World Cup. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal and Qatar, this chapter analyses social transformations in rural Nepal, the exploitative regulation of migration and the human condition of Nepali migrants in Qatar as well as the meanings ascribed to it. We look at the pressure exerted by international organisations, namely the International Labour Organization (ILO) and international trade unions, that led to reforms recently introduced by Qatar and reflect on the longer-term implications, if and when the 'brave new world' of Qatar no longer requires an extensive migrant presence.

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