

The drivers and trajectories of Nepalese multiple migrations to the Arab Gulf

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ABSTRACT

Within the last decade, oil-rich countries in the Middle East have become among the largest receivers of Nepalese labor migrants. It is estimated that about half of the total Nepalese labor migration currently funnels into Gulf Cooperation Council countries (the GCC). In this article, we explore the dynamics of these migrations based on in-depth interviews with Nepalese migrants at different stages of their migration trajectories. We find that migrations within the GCC are not a one-time phenomenon. Multiple migrations that involve crisscrossing the Arab Gulf are an important part of Nepalese migrants' experiences. We distinguish between circular, serial and stepwise Nepalese migrations and argue that they are shaped by migrant strategies and the various local, regional and international structures that enable and constrain their migratory aspirations, temporary returns to Nepal and remigrations to the GCC and onwards.

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Political instability, poverty and unemployment in Nepal, on the one hand, and an increased opportunity to find employment and better wages in various receiving countries, on the other hand, have resulted in the emigration of several million people from Nepal over the last decade (Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; IOM 2019).¹ Traditionally, India has been the largest destination for Nepalese migrants; however, over the last two decades, Malaysia and countries in the Arab Gulf, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have emerged as other major destinations for Nepalese temporary labor migrants (IOM 2019).²

The migration drivers and changes in the patterns of Nepalese labor migrations have been explored in previous research (Bruslé 2008; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017). Several previous studies have also discussed the circular and seasonal Nepalese migrations to India (Bruslé 2008; Sapkota 2018; Khan 2021).³ However, the circular and multinational features of Nepalese migrations to the GCC are still largely under-researched. The current article contributes to reducing this knowledge gap by building on previous relevant studies on other migrant groups in the region. Several studies on temporary labor migrations from other countries to the Middle East have shown that labor migrations in the region may involve several stages and may take different forms (Ali

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2011; Kamrava and Babar 2012; Piper and Withers 2018; Valenta and Jakobsen 2017). For example, studies on temporary Asian migrants in the Middle East, *inter alia*, the Philippines, Indonesia, India and other countries have indicated that migrants engage in various forms of circular, serial and stepwise migrations (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013; Parreñas et al. 2019; Valenta 2020; Parreñas 2021).⁴

We build on these contributions by providing a more dynamic understanding of multiple Nepalese migrations to the Middle East and onwards. Three interrelated research questions are explored: (i) What are the main features of Nepalese labor migrations to the Middle East? (ii) Which migrant experiences and trajectories of recurrent migrations can we discern? (iii) How can we understand and explain circular, serial and stepwise migrations of Nepalese migrants in the region?

Throughout the present article, we relate the Nepalese case to the most recent studies, which indicate that temporary migrations are often not a one-time phenomenon, but instead may consist of several, more or less complex multinational migratory steps (Parreñas 2021; Paul and Yeoh 2021; Wee and Yeoh 2021). Along with previous studies, we maintain that the high requirements and costs of migration make most of the countries that offer higher wages out of reach for most Nepalese workers. In this context, the GCC countries are not perceived as the most desirable; rather, they are the most affordable destination for Nepalese temporary labor migrants, for both those who stay in the region and those who aspire to move onwards.

The current article is divided into several interconnected sections. In the first section, we outline previous relevant research and relate it to the core features of Nepalese migrations to the GCC and onwards. Here, we also clarify the relevant concepts of serial and stepwise migration and how this study relates to previous research. Thereafter, we discuss our methodological approach and our sample, followed by how we coped with the practical methodological challenges. In the remaining parts of the article, we explore in more detail the experiences and migration trajectories of Nepalese migrants. Here, we also identify and discuss the structural forces, migration drivers, migrant strategies and motivations that affect their circular and serial migrations to the GCC region and their further stepwise migrations out of the region.

Migration trends and relevant previous research

Figure 1 shows the development of Nepalese migrants in the four largest receiving countries over the last three decades.⁵ As shown in the figure, receiving countries in the GCC region have experienced a large increase in Nepalese migrants in the last decade. The largest receiver of Nepalese migrants is India. However, more recently, Malaysia and the countries in the Middle East have become large receivers of Nepalese migrants. Among the 20 largest receivers of Nepalese migrants in 2019, half were in the Middle East. The largest receivers of Nepalese migrants in the Middle East—Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—hosted about half of the total Nepalese migrants.⁶ In 2019, Qatar hosted about 400,000 Nepalese migrants, and Saudi Arabia was the second largest receiver in the region, with 330,000 Nepalese migrants (IOM 2019).⁷

Previous studies on migrations from Asia to the Arab Gulf and onwards have distinguished between the different categories of destinations, *inter alia*, based on their economy, wages, working conditions, migration requirements, costs of migration and

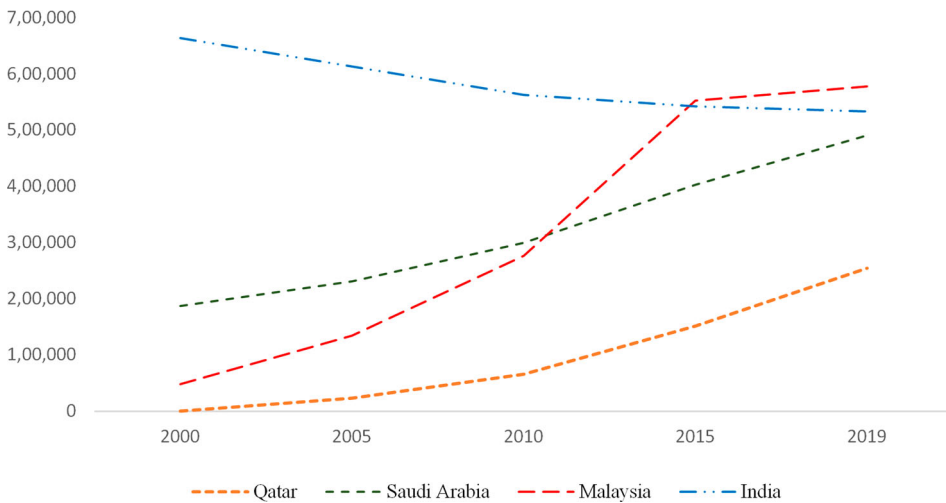


Figure 1. Nepalese migrant stock in the four largest receiving countries (2000–2019).

type of residence they provide (Paul and Yeoh 2021; Valenta 2020). Based on these criteria, some researchers have divided destination countries into several tiers (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013). In the lower tiers are the countries that provide low wages, but which are relatively easy to enter for large groups of Asian migrants of all skills. In the top tier are wealthy developed countries that provide higher wages and better working conditions than the lower tier countries (Paul 2011). However, researchers maintain that the top-tier countries are costly to enter and pose many requirements when it comes to migrants' education and skill levels (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013; Valenta 2020; Paul and Yeoh 2021).

The above-mentioned studies on serial migration do not focus on Nepalese migrations to the Gulf. Yet we can still use the proposed hierarchy criteria and categorise the popular destinations for Nepalese migrants into tiers based on their economy, wages, costs of migration and education and skill criteria. Affordable migration has resulted in a high number of Nepalese migrants in India, despite India having the lowest average earnings when compared with any of the other large destinations for Nepalese migrants (IOM 2019).

Compared with India, the GCC countries represent higher-tier destinations, but the costs of migration to these destinations are also higher. Furthermore, most Nepalese migrants in the GCC region are low-skilled migrants who are recruited into poorly paid, demanding and sometimes dangerous jobs (Adhikary et al. 2017; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017). Nevertheless, GCC countries have become popular destinations for Nepalese migrants because they can earn considerably higher wages in the GCC region than in India (Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; IOM 2019).

It seems that migrants from Nepal choose destinations in the GCC region rather than India because of the higher wages, and they migrate to the GCC region rather than to top-tier country destinations in the Global North because of the considerably lower costs of migration and higher level of accessibility.⁸ However, when exploring the migration trajectories of multinational migrants, we should keep in mind that migrations

between receiving countries within the same country tier also matter, as they may provide different contexts of reception. We should also keep in mind that it is not only the economic realities and costs of migration that play a role in people's migratory decisions. As we will soon see, our study concurs with previous studies on multiple migrations in the GCC and elsewhere, suggesting that migration trajectories are also influenced by the immigration and integration policies of receiving countries and migrants' need for stability and integration (Ossman 2004; Carlos 2013; Wee and Yeoh 2021; Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021).

Previous studies also describe various facets of recurrent migrations in the region, *inter alia*, providing the concepts of circular, serial migrations and stepwise migrations which are of relevance for this study (Ali 2011; Paul 2011; Valenta 2020; Paul and Yeoh 2021). Circular migrations are usually associated with recurrent migrations to the same destination country (Bruslé 2008; Joppe 2012; Khan 2021), whereas serial and stepwise migrations depict different facets of migrations between several destination countries. For example, Parreñas (2021) depicts serial migrations as lateral, recurrent migrations within the same country tier, whereas Paul (2011) associates stepwise migrations with mobility from lower- to higher-tier countries (Valenta 2020; Paul and Yeoh 2021).

In the next pages, we build on the above-mentioned studies, contributing to the field with the experiences of Nepalese migrants in the GCC. Furthermore, focusing on migrant agency and coercive and enabling structures, we demonstrate how the dynamic of circular, serial and stepwise migrations may be better understood, distinguished and elaborated.

Methodology

We visited different countries in the Middle East numerous times over the last decade, where we had the opportunity to speak with temporary labor migrants and migration experts.⁹ These visits helped us enhance our knowledge and understanding of the contexts of reception in the Middle East. The core of the current study is based on qualitative interviews conducted with Nepalese migrants at different stages of their multinational migration trajectories. Forty-six Nepalese migrants were interviewed in the period 2018–2021. Their ages ranged from 24 to 51, with most of them in their 20s and 30s.

Most Nepalese migrants in the Middle East are male (IOM 2019).¹⁰ Male migrants also prevailed in our qualitative sample. They worked in different professions, including as security guards, delivery drivers, warehouse workers, housekeepers, construction and factory workers and restaurant and shop attendants. However, our sample also included female migrants and migrants with higher levels of education who worked as accountants, managers, researchers, engineers and other white-collar jobs in the Middle East.¹¹

Studies on multinational migration encounter many practical methodological challenges due to their extended temporality, multispatiality and complexity (Paul and Yeoh 2020). In other words, they often last for many years and include residence in different countries. Furthermore, researchers exploring recurrent multinational migrations must discern between a variety of experiences and capture dynamic changes in migration decisions and the contexts of migration (Paul and Yeoh 2020).

These practical challenges also influenced our interviewing and sampling procedures. We coped with multispatiality by conducting most of the interviews via telephone, Skype, Zoom and other digital platforms, which enabled us to reach informants in many countries.¹² Furthermore, we responded to the extended temporality and complexity via strategic sampling and by making adjustments to our sampling procedures in several phases of the study.

In the early stages of the study, we targeted people in the GCC who were at different stages of their migration trajectories, life phases and family situations. In later phases of the study, we used strategic sampling to focus even more on the features, dynamics and causes of recurrent and multinational Nepalese migrations to the GCC region and onwards from the region to the West.

In the final stage of our sampling, in 2021, most of the interviews were with Nepalese stepwise migrants who had previously lived in the GCC but who, at the time of the interview, lived in Europe, North America and Australia. Our final sample, therefore, included people of different backgrounds who were at different stages of their migratory trajectories. Some of them were single, whereas others were married. We also met migrants who had children, which influenced their motivations and altered their migration trajectories. Some were in Nepal, but planned to migrate to the Middle East again, whereas others had left the region and resettled permanently in top-tier countries outside the GCC. In total, the migrants' accounts provide a variety of perspectives and migrant trajectories that capture the dynamics and causes of recurrent Nepalese serial migrations to the GCC region and beyond.

Results: the trajectories of Nepalese serial migrations

Migration researchers have tried to conceptualise the notion of multinational migrations by using different concepts, such as repeated, secondary, serial, onward, sequential and stepwise migrations. These terms are associated with a series of sequential migratory steps that may have linear, circular, direct, indirect, lateral or hierarchical patterns (Ossman 2004; Takenaka 2007; Parreñas et al. 2019; Paul and Yeoh 2021; Parreñas 2021). Our qualitative interviews with Nepalese migrants also indicated a large variety of migration trajectories. In Table 1, we have selected the cases that illustrate a variety of migratory aspirations and migration trajectories.¹³

The displayed cases can be categorised according to specific patterns of migration. We can also distinguish cases according to the length of stay in the different receiving countries and the migrants' aspirations. It is also possible to sort them according to the migrants' stage in the migration process. Indeed, some migrants in the study were in the early stages of their migration careers and had only a short migration experience, whereas others had been migrants for years. Based on these and other variations, we can distinguish between various forms of circular migrations, serial migrations and stepwise migrations. Most of the cases presented in Table 1 resemble some of these categories.¹⁴ At the time of the interviews, most migrants were primarily focused on keeping their jobs and combining their residence in the destination country with frequent stays in Nepal. However, many planned to move onwards, and it is expected that some of them will engage in circular migrations or even change their intended receiving country at a later stage of their migration trajectories.

Table 1. Migration trajectories and plans of Nepalese migrants²⁷.

Informant	Age	Trajectory including years spent in the countries	Migration plans
Suman	40	Nepal - India (5) - Nepal (2) - Saudi Arabia (13)	Undetermined
Naresh	27	Nepal - UAE (2) - Nepal (0.5) - Bahrain (2)	Plans to return to Nepal
Hari	30	Nepal - Bahrain (2) - Nepal (0.5) - Hong Kong (1)	Plans to return to Nepal
Bishal	34	Nepal - India (7) - Nepal (0.3) - UAE (2) - Nepal (0.3) - France (3) - Nepal (0.2) - Netherlands (4)	Undetermined
Sachin	25	Nepal - Malaysia (3.5) - Nepal (0.5) - Kuwait (3)	Plans to return to Nepal
Krish	25	Nepal - Qatar (2) - Nepal (2) - Japan (2)	Plans to stay in Japan
Ramesh	37	Nepal - UAE (3) - Belgium (1)	Plans to settle in Belgium
Mohan	39	Nepal - Kuwait (3) - Nepal (0.6) - Canada (0.4) - Nepal (0.8) - Canada (8)	Plans to return to Nepal
Manoj	27	Nepal - UAE (5) - Nepal (1) - Australia (3)	Plans to stay in Australia
Kumar	45	Nepal - UAE (3) - Nepal (0.3) - UAE (2) - Nepal (0.2) - UAE (2) - Nepal (2) - UAE (1)	Plans to return to Nepal
Buddi	32	Nepal - Malaysia (3) - Nepal (1) - Bahrain (0.5)	Undetermined
Manish	32	Nepal - India (1) - Nepal (m/d) - UAE (2) - Nepal (0.2) - UAE (2) - Nepal (1) - UAE (6)	Plans to return to Nepal
Hom	36	Nepal - Qatar (1) - Nepal (6) - USA (1)	Plans to return to Nepal
Sunil	30s	Nepal - Saudi Arabia (2) - Nepal (m/d) - Malaysia (3)	Plans to return to Nepal
Samundra	30	Nepal - Saudi Arabia (2)	Plans to migrate to Portugal
Najir	29	Nepal - Saudi Arabia (3) - Nepal (2) - Kuwait (5)	Plans to return to Nepal
Rajesh	26	Nepal - UAE (3)	Plans to migrate to USA
Nikhil	51	Nepal - Malaysia (4) - Nepal (m/d) - Qatar (2) - Nepal (m/d) - UAE (2) - Nepal (4)	Plans to stay in Nepal
Rajib	34	Nepal - Saudi Arabia (3) - Nepal (1) - Malaysia (3) - Nepal (1)	Plans to migrate to Kuwait
Sarita	40	Nepal - UAE (0.1) - Nepal (0.1) - UAE (10) - USA (m/d) - UAE (4) - USA (2)	Plans to stay in USA
Haribansha	28	Nepal - Australia (2) - Nepal (1) - UAE (3)	Plans to migrate to Australia
Dayahang	30s	Nepal - Qatar (4) - Germany (3)	Undetermined
Kedar	31	Nepal - Qatar (2) - Nepal (6) - Canada (2)	Plans to stay in Canada
Sunita	36	Nepal - UAE (5) - Nepal (0.1) - Canada (7)	Plans to stay in Canada
Rajendra	30	Nepal - UAE (2) - Nepal (0.5) - Australia (3)	Plans to return to Nepal
Dryshia	39	Nepal - Kuwait (7) - Canada (6)	Plans to stay in Canada

Indeed, several migrants, like Nikhil, Naresh and Sachin (see Table 1), conveyed that after a certain time, they engaged in serial migrations, moving between Nepal, Malaysia and different countries in the GCC region. However, there were also others, like Sarita, Mohan and Kedar, who managed to move onwards, advancing to higher-tier countries. The migration trajectories of these and other migrants who have migrated onwards to Canada, Hong Kong, the United States and Japan resemble a pattern of stepwise migrations detected in previous studies (Valenta 2020; Paul and Yeoh 2021). These trajectories were sometimes swift, where migrants climbed relatively smoothly from the lower- to higher-tier destination countries, as Ramesh, Manoj and Krish did. However, they also sometimes included many steps, alterations between different types of statuses, temporary returns to Nepal, downward social mobility and various detours. Haribansha and Sarita represent such trajectories (see also the other cases in Table 1). Sarita's case is especially valuable, as multinational female Nepalese migrants in the Gulf comprise an understudied area of Nepalese migration. We will present Sarita's motivations for stepwise migration later in the article. As we will see, her stepwise migration was not only motivated by socioeconomic aspirations; it resulted in downward social mobility, but also fulfilled her need to provide a more stable future for her family and her children.

In the next sections, we analyse in more detail the observed patterns of circular, serial and stepwise migration. We build on previous research and explore whether the answer is to be found at the nexus of international and local structural constraints, both in Nepal and in the receiving countries. Later, we relate these structures to the actions, resources and strategies of the Nepalese migrants in our study.

Coercive forces in receiving countries

Parreñas et al. (2019) point out that serial migrations emerge in a specific context: ‘when migrants (1) have access to a wide range of low-cost destinations, (2) face exclusionary contexts of reception including ineligible residency and vulnerability to deportation and (3) confront financial insecurity upon return’ (1241–1244). Parreñas et al. (2019) contend that in such a context, secondary migrations may produce precarity, which has also been illustrated in several other studies (Kamrava and Babar 2012; Babar et al. 2016; Valenta 2020).

Some of the above-mentioned structural forces also had a profound effect on the migration trajectories of Nepalese migrants heading to the GCC region. In this context, the receiving countries in the GCC area represent Parreñas’s (2021) criteria because they provide a wide range of affordable destinations to Nepalese labor migrants. The core principle of the labor migration regime in the GCC is that it is relatively easy to enter the region, but it is impossible to achieve permanent settlement and citizenship. At best, labor migrants may live their lives in protracted temporariness. Most migrants in the study were from poor families and had clear economic motivations for migration to the Gulf, where they were employed in short-term contracts of two to three years. They often had renewable contracts, but their jobs were often unstable and demanding, and they experienced frequent terminations of their contracts, injuries and subsequent returns to their home country. Some tried to prolong their source of income and remittances, taking irregular jobs, but they then risked sanctions, deportation and immigration bans.

The above-mentioned factors contributed to temporary residence in the region. They also triggered subsequent remigration. For example, Naresh, a 27-year-old Nepali man, migrated to Dubai in 2015, where he worked in a cotton factory as a blue-collar worker. He got a job via a manpower company in Kathmandu and had a three-year contract. However, after two and a half years, the company went bankrupt. Therefore, Naresh returned to Nepal, but soon after, he started looking for new employment in the GCC region. Naresh spent half a year in Nepal before he remigrated to the GCC region. This time, he signed a two-year contract as a security guard in a shopping mall in Bahrain. At the time of the interview, Naresh planned to return to Nepal, but he did not exclude the possibility of future emigration to the GCC area. Likewise, Rajib, a 34-year-old Nepalese man, had worked in a hotel in Saudi Arabia for three years. He wanted to work longer in the country, but he returned to Nepal because it was not possible to renew the contract. Rajib spent a year in Nepal trying to find a new job abroad. Eventually, he got a job as a security guard in Malaysia. He worked there for three years, but he suffered a serious accident and eventually returned to Nepal. Nevertheless, Rajib planned to remigrate to the GCC region after recovering from his injury.

In addition to the above-described factors, various crises, both in the receiving countries and in Nepal, affected the serial migrations of Nepalese migrants. Here, we can mention economic downturns¹⁵ and natural catastrophes.¹⁶ This is also the case with the current pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are not within the scope of the current article, but it is pertinent to note that the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in the termination of many contracts and the subsequent return of thousands of Nepalese migrants.¹⁷ However, experiences with other crises that also disturbed the dynamic of temporary migrations in the region teach us that serial migrations will surge again in the post-crisis period (Rajan and Narayana 2010; Buckley 2012; Valenta 2020). This is also shown in a recent research report published by the International Organisation for Migration that shows that more than half of Nepalese migrants who returned to their home country during the pandemic have plans to remigrate.¹⁸

Enabling structures: new destinations and opportunities for onward migrations

The trajectories of serial migration are affected and perpetuated by coercive structures, as the cases presented above illustrate. However, the dynamics of the serial migrations of the migrants in the current study may also be related to the enabling structures that create new migration channels. Indeed, another structural factor of relevance to serial and stepwise migration from Nepal is the increasing number of bilateral agreements that have enabled labor migrations between Nepal and the various receiving countries. Large-scale emigrations from Nepal were traditionally directed to India, which was regularised via a bilateral agreement with India starting in the 1950s. However, several options other than India have emerged, directing large-scale migrations to the Middle East and Asia. For example, over the last two decades, countries such as Malaysia, Qatar, the UAE, South Korea and Japan have signed bilateral agreements with Nepal that regulate the recruitment, immigration, employment and repatriation of Nepalese migrants. New destinations have also emerged in Europe, primarily in the EU's member states in South and East Europe, which struggle to attract labor migrants from the EU's internal labor market. The number of Nepalese in the United States has also almost tripled in recent years, from less than 60,000 in 2010 to almost 200,000 in 2019.¹⁹

The above-mentioned receiving countries have increased the pool of available destinations for the different categories of Nepalese migrants. The stories of our Nepalese informants indicate that the increased number of possible destinations has also created new opportunities in their choice of destination countries, bringing about multiple migration avenues to employment abroad and perpetuating serial or stepwise migrations. For example, Krish, a 25-year-old Nepalese migrant, first went to Qatar right after he finished high school. He worked as a security guard in Qatar for two years, but the job was difficult and paid poorly, so he eventually returned to Nepal, where he spent two years unemployed. After two years in Nepal, he migrated again, this time to Japan, following his girlfriend, who had begun studies there. Krish's migration to Japan was enabled by recent changes in regulations in Japan's migration policies, which allowed considerable immigration of Nepalese students and their family dependents (Tanaka 2019).

It is relevant to note here that the numbers of Nepalese international students and family dependants have increased drastically in recent years, with Australia and Japan being the most popular new destinations. Several factors may explain the large surge in the number of Nepalese students in Australia and Japan. Here, it is pertinent to stress that these countries permit Nepalese students and family dependents to work while in the country.²⁰ They also provide avenues for long-term or even permanent residence for certain categories of students, skilled migrants and their dependents, contributing to the popularity of these destinations (Upadhyay-Dhungel and Lamichhane 2011; Ghimire and Barry 2020).²¹

Coercive structures in Nepal: unsustainable returns and remigrations

The accounts of our Nepalese informants indicate that in some cases, the migrants' returns were not intended and that they were coerced because of contract termination, unfulfilled expectations, injuries and deportations. However, in other cases, the returns were voluntary and primarily seen as prolonged holidays that the migrants were taking to spend time with their families; these returns were then followed by subsequent remigrations to the GCC. In these cases, remigration was intended. Yet, there are also cases where the returns to the home country were meant to be permanent and where remigration was not planned. For example, people returned, got a job or started small businesses in Nepal, such as small shops, restaurants or farms. However, if they lost that job or the project failed, they were forced to emigrate again.

For example, Rajib, the returnee from Malaysia, had invested in a poultry farm, but he gradually realised that it would not bring a sufficient and stable income to his family. At the time of the interview, he planned to remigrate to Kuwait, which would be his third destination. An unsustainable return was also experienced by Kumar, who returned to Kathmandu after being in the GCC region for seven years. He visited Nepal twice while working in the UAE. The third return was meant to be permanent. He took a loan and invested his savings in apartments in Kathmandu. He hoped he would rent them to foreign tourists. However, Kumar's apartment did not attract tourists, and he suffered a great loss. Because he had to pay his debt and did not manage to find a proper job in Nepal, he had no other option than to look for employment abroad. Kumar eventually managed to get his old job back in the UAE. At the time of the interview, he was in Dubai. He still planned to return to Nepal, but not in the immediate future.

The above-presented cases outline the structures in both the receiving countries and Nepal that trigger the recurrent returns and migrations of Nepalese migrants. Along with several other researchers, we acknowledge that the multiple returns, re-emigrations, country changes and other features of migrant trajectories in the region are affected by various coercive structures (Gardner 2008; Piper and Withers 2018; Parreñas 2021). However, we also recognise migrants' attempts to navigate the coercing and enabling structures while attempting to improve their situation and increase their remittances and the life circumstances of their families (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019; Valenta 2020). As we will soon see, some of these attempts and strategies shaped, perpetuated and motivated, either directly or indirectly, their trajectories of circular, serial and stepwise migrations.

Structure and agency of recurrent Nepalese labor migrations to the GCC region

All labor migrations to the GCC region are meant to be only temporary. However, it is not uncommon for many temporary migrants to stay for years, even decades, renewing employment contracts, changing jobs and altering between different statutes (Valenta 2020). Important elements of these strategies are the recurring returns and remigrations, which resemble the conventional pattern of circular migrations. Previous studies on circular migrations have shown that circular migrations are often linked to the seasonal needs of migrants in certain sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and tourism (Bruslé 2008; Joppe 2012; Khan 2021). However, the trajectories of Nepalese migrants in the GCC are seldom linked to these seasonal demands for foreign labor. Their circular migrations to the GCC should be seen as a part of their navigating the local regulations. Here, maneuvering through employment regulations was most often mentioned by the Nepalese migrants. For example, Suman, a 40-year-old man, had been living in Saudi Arabia on and off for over 13 years. He has changed jobs seven times over the past 13 years, trying to find better job opportunities. With each job change, Suman returned to Nepal to apply for another visa. He stayed there for a few months while waiting for the new visa and then moved back to Saudi Arabia soon after. It is relevant to note here that Saudi Arabia and several other countries in the GCC have required labor migrants to leave the country before allowing them to change their visas or employers. This prompted migrants to return to Nepal, as Suman did, or to take a detour to neighboring countries before returning to a new job or beginning their new resident status in the receiving country.

In the GCC region, workplace changes are regulated via the kafala system, sponsorship regulations which often bind migrants to their employers for a certain period. Therefore, most of the Nepalese migrants we interviewed were improving their life circumstances in the GCC area by waiting for their contract to expire or by breaching the contract and, thereafter, finding a new, hopefully better, employer. However, for those who breached their contract, the authorities usually required that they leave the country or would deny the migrant from taking new employment for a certain period. Therefore, most of our informants waited for their current employment contract to end and did not return to Nepal before receiving a non-objection certificate from their original employer.²² Thereafter, they returned to Nepal to spend a few months with their family before migrating again to a new job in the GCC region, and, in that way, they perpetuated their circular migrations to the GCC region.

Several previous studies exploring the recurrent migrations of Asian migrants also indicate that temporary returns to the home country were part of migrants' lives (Valenta 2020; Parreñas 2021). Some researchers have also made the distinction between 'staggered' and 'serial' migrants, which partly resembles our conceptualisation of Nepalese migration in the region (Parreñas 2021). The first concept of 'staggered' migrants resembles the strategies of 'circular migrants' that we described in this section; these are the migrants who navigated kafala regulations, altering between temporary returns to Nepal and temporary residence in the GCC. In that sense, these migrants differ from 'serial migrants', whose strategies are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Navigating coercive structures through serial migrations

Serial migrations are usually associated with country changes that occur within the same country tier destinations, which offer similar rights, wages and work conditions (Parreñas et al. 2019; Valenta 2020). We have detected several reasons for country changes. For example, some Nepalese migrants changed their destination country because they were denied longer periods in which to take new employment in the current country either because they were deported or absconded from exploitative jobs. They could not afford to wait for the ban to expire, so they started looking for employment in other host countries. In other cases, the country change was related to attempts to find a better receiving country and job in the region.

GCC countries share many similarities; *for years*, they have managed large-scale temporary labor migrations via the kafala system, which has often been criticised for its rigidity and exploitative nature (Gardner 2008; Kamrava and Babar 2012; Piper and Withers 2018). Researchers place GCC countries in the same tier, though they recognise that the context of reception in these countries may differ (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013; Valenta 2020). However, migrants often experience different currency fluctuations that affect conversion rates, their wages and their remittances. The countries have also diverged over time regarding certain regulations (Fargues and Shah 2018; Valenta 2020). More flexible kafala policies were, for example, recently introduced in the UAE and Qatar, which removed some of the restrictions related to changing jobs and employers. Furthermore, in certain periods, the countries had different demands for foreign labor in various sectors. The Nepalese migrants in our study were maneuvering through the above-mentioned structures via serial migrations and country changes. They were engaged in evaluations of alternative destinations in the region, where the costs and risks of migration, accessibility, income levels, opportunity for job change and access to supportive networks were compared.

Multiple migrations and transnational networks

Previous studies on multinational migration have stressed the importance of social capital and international social networks (Paul 2015; Zhan, Aricat, and Zhou 2020; Francisco-Menchavez 2020). As Francisco-Menchavez (2020) points out, migratory choices and strategies are influenced by the migration experiences of family members with various destinations. Many of our Nepalese informants had family members, relatives and friends working in different countries. These people informed them about the opportunities and various risks in different destinations, encouraged other migrants to join them and helped them to migrate, often perpetuating serial migrations. For example, Manish worked first in India before being encouraged by his brother to join him in the UAE. Thereafter, he left India and engaged in recurrent migrations between Nepal and the UAE. His agency was expressed through these migratory steps, which were all meant to provide better employment and income. Similarly, Rajib was planning to change his destination country. He was coerced to return to Nepal from Malaysia because of a work-related injury. Without a proper income, he was ‘pushed’ to emigrate again. Yet, his agency and transnational networks were pronounced in his plans for his next migration, especially during his considerations about the available destinations. He considered Malaysia to be a better destination than Saudi Arabia, where he had also

worked before, but nonetheless, he planned to join his brother in Kuwait based on strategic evaluations of the costs, wage differentials and other potential advantages and risks of the planned country change.

The common feature of the serial migrations of migrants in the current study is that they usually involved changes in the receiving country with shorter or longer intermediary stays in the home country, or what Parreñas calls ‘temporary returns’ (Parreñas 2021). As we have seen, these temporary returns may be explained by unsustainable returns, dealing with the kafala regulations or job aspirations (Parreñas 2021; Valenta 2020). However, we should add that the informants also explained their longing for family members and their home country. As already noted, most of the interviewees’ families were in Nepal. Therefore, the intermediary stays in their home country may also be seen as one among many of the dimensions of their transnational family life, such as sending remittances, supporting hometown associations and having frequent communication with family members in their home country and other countries (Neupane 2019; Valenta 2020; Francisco-Menchavez 2020).

Mitigating hardships and opportunities for stepwise migrations

According to Paul (2011), stepwise migration is a long-term migration strategy that includes ‘multiple stops in various intermediate locations as part of an intentional, hierarchical progression towards a migrant’s preferred destination’ (1844). Paul asserts that stepwise migrations are likeliest to happen among the ‘middle category of migrant’—migrants who do not have the resources to move directly to the most desired countries but who can accumulate them gradually, climbing step by step up the hierarchy of the receiving countries (Paul 2011; Paul and Yeoh 2021).

The above-presented cases had some of these characteristics. Yet, the people we have discussed so far were all sojourning in the GCC. This was the most common migratory pattern among the Nepalese migrants in the study. However, there were also Nepalese migrants who had migrated to or were planning to move to higher-tier countries such as Australia, Japan, Canada, the United States or countries in the EU. For example, Kedar, a 31-year-old Nepalese man, migrated to Qatar after completing his undergraduate studies, where he worked a white-collar job. Kedar returned to Nepal after two years because he wished to continue his university education. Eventually, Kedar applied for residence in Canada via the skilled worker program, and after three years of processing time, he finally managed to migrate to Canada. Kedar’s story concurs with Paul’s arguments because Kedar conveyed that his work experience in Qatar played a major role in obtaining his permanent residence in Canada; it helped him gain enough of the ‘points’ required by the Canadian immigration point system.

Kedar acquired permanent residence in Canada, which was impossible to obtain in Qatar, and his salary improved because of this. In this sense, Kedar’s trajectory resembles the narratives of stepwise migrants from other studies (Carlos 2013; Zhan, Aricat, and Zhou 2020). Yet, the narratives of the Nepalese individuals in our study indicate that their trajectories were not always that straightforward or comprised an intentional upward climb in the hierarchy of the destination countries, as has been observed in some previous research (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013). The stories of the Nepalese migrants

in the GCC region, who migrated or attempted to migrate onwards to higher-tier countries, often show that these stepwise migrations may include a variety of experiences and trajectories. Indeed, in some cases, the trajectories of our Nepalese stepwise migrants consisted of a few intermediary steps, whereas in others, the multistage migrations included alternations between various types of circular and multinational migrations, unsuccessful migration attempts and unintended migratory cycles, combined with stays in the home country.²³

Migratory steps are not always based on long-term strategies, as indicated in some previous studies (Carlos 2013; Zijlstra 2020). The stepwise migrations of the migrants in the current study were more often than not based on continuous adjustments and revaluations of the migrants' situations and plans. Migration to the new destinations was a response to emerging opportunities and hardships and their attempts to mitigate them.

The stories of our informants indicate that migration to higher-tier countries had indeed contributed to significant improvements in the migrants' life circumstances. However, migration to higher-tier countries may also have more complex ramifications. Finally, we should also stress that the stepwise migrants highly valued the possibility of resettling permanently in the receiving countries. Even those migrants who achieved stable jobs and high salaries in the GCC region lacked the stability that permanent resident status and the citizenship of developed Western countries could provide. These concerns were emphasised by migrants with children and families. As we already noted, migrations to the Gulf were motivated by economic reasons. However, the stepwise migrations out of the region in this group were the result of a quest for safety and stability. This was most clearly expressed by Sarita, who moved to the United States after a protracted temporary residence in the UAE. However, in her case, this led to downward social mobility. She and her husband left well-paying jobs and a middle-class lifestyle in Dubai for an unskilled, low-paying job at a gas station in the United States. Nevertheless, they considered their migration to the United States as a long-term investment that would provide permanent residence, US citizenship and stability to them and their daughter. In other words, they shared the same motivations as most of the other stepwise migrants we met in the Middle East, not only from Nepal but also from other countries in the Global South, who aspired to move onwards from the region to permanent residence in the West.²⁴

Limitations

Multiple migrations may last for decades and include residence in various countries, which may impose various practical challenges for researchers (Paul and Yeoh 2020). We coped successfully with the challenges of extended temporality and multispatiality via our sampling and interviewing procedures. Nevertheless, biographical accounts of multiple migrations taken in the past impose certain limitations. Migrants' self-biographies may be reworked and reinterpreted in light of their present life circumstances and the anticipated future. These weaknesses should be addressed in future research in line with recent methodological innovations—including longitudinal studies and re-interviewing of Nepalese migrants at different stages of their circular, serial and stepwise migrations.²⁵

Conclusion

GCC countries have become a major destination for Nepalese temporary labor migrants. In the current article, we have explored the dynamics of Nepalese migrations to the GCC region, focusing on the recurrent and multinational features of these movements. Our findings suggest that multiple migrations that crisscross the Arab Gulf take many forms and happen at the nexus of external structures and migrant agency. Along with previous studies on other migrant groups in the region, we have argued that Nepalese migrations are affected and perpetuated by the temporary migration policies in the region, international barriers to migrations from the Global South and a lack of opportunities for sustainable returns in the home country.

However, unlike most previous studies on migration to the GCC region, which focus primarily on constraining and exploitative structures,²⁶ we also explored how Nepalese migrants mitigate these structures. Here, migrants compare the costs, advantages and risks of multiple migrations to different destinations. They navigate the above-mentioned restrictive policies, accumulate experiences and resources and use multiple migrations to improve their life circumstances.

The Nepalese migrants in the present study primarily engaged in circular and indirect serial migrations, shuttling between countries in the Gulf, Malaysia and their home country. However, there were also those who managed to climb up the hierarchy of the receiving countries. In some cases, stepwise migration went smoothly. In others, their trajectories involved drawbacks, unrealised and postponed plans, downward social mobility and alterations between different forms of recurrent migrations in the region. While fighting the local, regional and international constraining structures, these people altered between shorter and longer returns to their country and temporary employment in the GCC region before they eventually managed to exit the loop and move onwards to more permanent residence in the countries outside the region.

Notes

1. According to Nepalese authorities, more than four million people have migrated in the last decade. See <https://moless.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Migration-Report-2020-English.pdf>
2. See <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/318581486560991532/pdf/WPS7965.pdf>; See also <https://moless.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Migration-Report-2020-English.pdf>
3. See also <https://www.ceslam.org/uploads/backup/Taken%20for%20Granted%20Nepai%20Migration%20to%20India.pdf>
4. Paul (2011) explored stepwise migrations of Pilipino domestic workers, whereas Carlos studied stepwise migrations of Filipino health workers in the GCC. Parreñas et al. (2019) explored serial migrations of domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. However, to our knowledge, no prior studies have explicitly examined multiple migrations of Nepalese migrants to the GCC.
5. The figure is the author's own compilation based on the UN's statistics. See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>. UN's data differ from those reported by Nepali missions abroad.
6. According to UN statistics, Nepalese emigration reached 2.2 million in 2019. See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>. In 2019, there

- were more than one million Nepalese migrants in the four largest receivers in the GCC: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (IOM 2019).
7. Data on Nepalese migrants in India in 2019 are not provided by Nepalese missions abroad. For more, see IOM (2019).
 8. The GCC countries allow the immigration of large numbers of labor migrants of all skill levels, whereas wealthy western countries are much more selective (Kamrava and Babar 2012; Valenta and Jakobsen 2016, 2017; Valenta 2020; Parreñas 2021).
 9. Since 2015, we have visited several countries in the region, including the UAE, Jordan and Israel. However, most visits were to the UAE, which is one of the largest receivers of labor migrants in the region and a significant receiver of labor migrants from Nepal.
 10. In the past few decades, Nepalese authorities have imposed several restrictions on the emigration of Nepalese female workers, including bans on the emigration of female domestic workers to the GCC. For an overview of the imposed restrictions, see Pyakurel (2018).
 11. These subcategories of the sample will be discussed in more detail later in the article.
 12. Most interviews were conducted in the Nepalese language by four Nepalese research assistants. We thank them for their valuable contribution to the project.
 13. All names are aliases.
 14. Because of space limitations, the table displays primarily serial and stepwise migration trajectories; simpler trajectories of the circular migrations between Nepal and one specific country in the GCC region are not displayed.
 15. The financial crisis resulted in the economic downturn and termination of many contracts in 2008, and many Asian labor migrants had to leave the GCC region. Many remigrated to the region when the economic situation improved and demand for foreign labor surged (Valenta 2020). For the impact of the financial crisis, see <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Global-economic-crisis-impacts-on-Nepal%E2%80%99s-migrant-workers-15549.html>
 16. The 2015 earthquake destroyed large parts of Nepal and left hundreds of thousands of Nepalese homeless. Many migrants returned to take care of their families and participate in the rebuilding of their homes. Later, many remigrated to the GCC region or other countries. For more on impacts of the earthquake, see <https://medium.com/@elailai94/displacement-and-migration-induced-by-2015-nepal-earthquake-33deebf8ba48>;
 17. See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/briefingnote/wcms_748917.pdf
 18. See <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/rapid-phone-survey.pdf>
 19. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-nepalese-in-the-u-s/>
 20. In Japan, almost 80 percent of Nepalese workers in the country are either family dependents or students. They are permitted to work in part-time unskilled jobs up to 28 h per week. In Australia, they are allowed to work 20 h a week. For more, see <https://www.australiavisa.com/immigration-news/student-500-visa-condition-8105-no-more-than-40-hours-per-fortnight-more-complicated-than-you-think/>
 21. See <https://www.smh.com.au/education/why-is-australia-such-a-popular-destination-for-nepalese-students>
 22. In most of the GCC countries, labor migrants have to acquire their employers' permission, a non-objection certificate, before changing jobs.
 23. See Table 1.
 24. For the experiences and strategies of stepwise migration of migrants from other Asian countries, see Ali (2011); Paul (2011); Carlos (2013); and Valenta (2020); Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021)
 25. For an overview on the methodological innovations in studying multinational migrations see Paul and Yeoh (2020).
 26. See for example, Gardner (2008), Babar et al. (2016), Piper and Withers (2018), Parreñas (2021).
 27. Note: m/d = missing data; number in parathesis = years spent in the country. Several migrants in the study had several holidays and short stays in Nepal. Short stays in Nepal

are indicated in the table if they were part of some migration strategy or structural forces. Migration strategies and the illustrative cases will be elaborated upon in more detail later in the article.

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