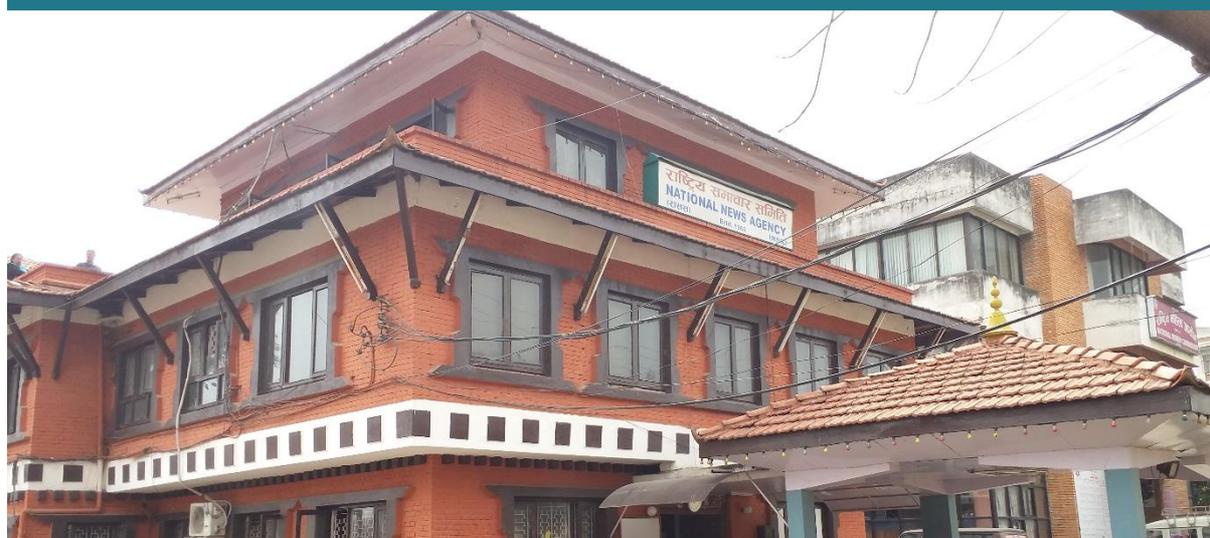


Representation of intermediaries in print media in Nepal: A case study from Nov 2018 to Mar 2020

WORKING PAPER



AUTHOR

Karan Kunwar, Research Assistant at Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER)



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1. INTRODUCTION

The sudden surge in outmigration from Nepal to countries other than India (primarily the Gulf States and Malaysia) started from the mid-1980s. The work available in these countries has now become a staple source of jobs for the Nepalese labour force. Intermediary agents are actors who fill a gap between the “supply and demand of labour, between receiving and sending countries” (Xiang, 2012). They include various organisations and institutions that help to establish an employment relationship between the hiring companies and employees (Wolfe & Hartley, 2005), and have played a central role in facilitating the outflows. The number of intermediary actors has increased over the years along with the increase in the number of migrants. Intermediary actors like recruitment agency, orientation centres, medical centres, financial institution and insurance are actively engaged in foreign employment of Nepal. At the moment there are 854 recruitment agencies, 148 orientation centres, 226 medical centres, 23 financial institutions, and 14 insurance companies (MOLESS, 2020).

Print media often shapes the perceptions of everyday people towards certain actors and so is an important factor in forming ‘discourses’ and shaping policies. However, there is a lack of analysis of how print media portrays intermediaries in Nepal. Hence in this paper we analyse the way print media has portrayed migration intermediaries. We particularly look at language, discourse and images as they are crucial factors in the production of meaning and (re)shaping the “shared meaning” of intermediaries for a larger discussion in society.

The paper is divided into three key parts. The first part gives a brief background on intermediaries including explaining who “intermediaries” are as per the operational definition used in this paper. It also gives their current status in Nepal. The second part describes the methodological approach applied to gather information on representation of those actors in the print media. The third section discusses findings on the portrayal of intermediaries. The final part is some insights into filling some gaps in ways media can facilitate factual discourse shaping of intermediaries calling for broader understanding of the actors involved in intermediaries.

2. WHO ARE INTERMEDIARIES?

Also known as the “middle space” in the migration process (Kern et al, 2015), intermediaries are a collection of actors facilitating migration, which have become essential as their “numbers, reach and influence” (Crawley et al., 2017) have grown. The global literature on intermediaries recognises various types of actors working in the middle space of migration: Xiang and Lindquist (2014) propose five types of intermediaries; the commercial (recruitment intermediaries), the regulatory (state

apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and so on), the technological (communications and transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international organisations), and the social (migrant networks). Similarly, Ambrosini (2016), proposes five types of action carried out by intermediaries that help with connection, provision of certain other services, help, tolerance and political pressure. Recently, drawing on existing definitions of intermediaries and brokers by various authors, Jones and Sha (2020) have constructed a working definition of an intermediary:

“An intermediary is an actor or institution that fosters, facilitates or sustains human mobility. The mediating or brokerage process is relational and often involves interactions of multiple actors operating within complex local-global, socio-economic, cultural and political environments. The practices of intermediaries often blur the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial, private and public, state and market, formal and informal, legal and illegal due to the complex nature and conditions in which this “middle space” exists.” Jones and Sha. 2020

In this paper we tried to look at how actors involved into types of action suggested by Ambrosini as they cover the wider range of intermediaries and as they reflect the types of intermediaries present in the context of Nepal’s labour migration, are represented. This grouping will help us to realise how much importance and space has been given to government and recruitment agencies compared to others in Nepali print media.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on secondary data and reviews of the relevant literature. The main sources of data for the analysis in this working paper were the news printed in the leading daily newspapers in Nepal (both Nepali and English), which the review team collected between November 2018 and March 2020. The research team had selected eight national dailies and one weekly newspaper (Bimarsha Weekly) for analysis. The eight daily newspapers were Gorkha Patra, The Kathmandu Post, The Himalayan Times, Kantipur Daily, The Annapurna Post, Republica, Naya Patrika and Karobar. Out of the nine selected newspapers, three are printed in in English and six in Nepali.

In total there were 239 articles related to migration from November 2018 to March 2020. The table below shows the type and frequency of these articles:

TAB 1. LIST OF NEWSPAPER REVIEWED BASED ON LANGUAGE AND FREQUENCY OF MIGRATION RELATED WRITINGS PUBLISHED

Newspapers	Language of Article	Frequency
Gorkhapatra	Nepali	32
Kantipur Daily	Nepali	32
Annapurna Post	Nepali	43
Karobar	Nepali	32
Naya Patrika	Nepali	8
The Kathmandu Post	English	32
The Himalayan Times	English	35
Republica	English	17
Bimarsha Weekly	Nepali	8
Total		239

After being identified, the relevant articles were summarized and thematic codes were developed based on the summaries of the papers. This was followed by coding of the summaries in the thematic codes for analysis. Data thus categorized thematically was analysed in Excel. This report is a part of the three media analysis papers under the MIDEQ research in the Nepal- Malaysia corridor. Apart from the newspapers, other national documents on labour migration such as those from the government, ILO, IOM were also reviewed.

3. LIMITATIONS

As the newspapers are predominantly focused on just a few actors (i.e. government, recruitment agencies, and civil society), the following findings also revolve around these actors and how they are represented in the print media. The actors providing various kinds of services and help are hardly mentioned in newspapers, hence the portrayal of those actors is hard to determine.

4. FINDINGS

For the purpose of clarity, the findings are classified into following findings. In first, we discuss the overall findings on intermediaries such as how papers of the last

two years mentioned intermediaries. There were 103 articles related to intermediaries.

4.1 EXCLUSION OF IMPORTANT INTERMEDIARY ACTORS

The review finds that newspapers primarily focus on a limited number of intermediary actors. As shown in section 1.1, various categories of intermediaries help migrants with their emigration, life abroad, and return. Of the 103 articles written about intermediaries, 78 were related to government, 28 to recruitment agencies, 20 to humanitarian, human rights and development agencies, and 15 to actors involved in providing relevant services (such as health screening, ticketing and insurance). There were no articles about private and public support structures/groups such as fellow migrants from other countries, informal migrant networks at the destination, or religious organisations in destination countries.

There were only two articles related to insurance, financial services such as loan products, and how airlines treat migrant workers differently from other customers. The Nepali diaspora and labour union representatives in destination countries have been found to play important roles like helping to repatriate the remains of deceased migrant workers¹ or informing migrants of legal changes in the destination countries.² These efforts did not come up in the newspapers.

Training organisations, which are crucial in helping migrants earn good salary during their foreign employment were not covered. Apart from an article published on the day of celebration of International Migrants' Day with the slogan, "Skills and Employment: A need for economic development" in 2019, there were no news about skill training centres for migrants throughout the period of our review. The report inquired about Foreign Employment Board ambitious target of providing free vocational training to 15,000 youths in 2019, however only 140 youth completed it. The reports opinion was that the program had a "tough eligibility criteria and lengthy procedure to register" (Dec, Republica). However, the entire report, missed the representative from Council for Technical Education Vocational Training (CTEVT) or Vocational and Skill Development Training Academy (VSDTA) or the viewpoints of the training centres. While such efforts should be bought up more frequently to media to inform potential training, it also needs to provide insights from actors involved in it. The report included no representatives from the CTEVT or the Vocational and Skill Development Training Academy (VSDTA) or the viewpoints of the training centres. Besides training, there were some articles also mentioned how

¹GEFONT, Body of Nepali Migrant Worker brought to the Nepal by the help of GSG <https://www.gefont.org/HQ2401389>

² GEFONT, Qatar GSG organizes Training on leadership development, labor law & traffic rules <https://www.gefont.org/VY9275584>

“pre-departure orientation training is very generic and fails to provide country-specific information” (Nov 2019, The Kathmandu Post).

Similarly, there were two articles about airlines, another important stakeholder in the migration process. The Kathmandu Post included an article on how airlines (mis)treat migrant workers. The article highlighted how migrant workers “have been barred from flying” even when they have all the “required documents and air tickets”. An article in Republica also reported a case where Nepalese migrant workers were robbed while flying home from Malaysia. The article added that after the Embassy of Nepal alerted the Malaysian government, they took swift action and similar robberies have not been reported since.

Likewise, another important intermediaries, the insurance system’s coverage in the national media is virtually non-existent. In the entire year, there were just two articles which focused on insurance. One of the reasons of low coverage might also be the fact that there are only four insurance companies authorised to insure people going for foreign employment and that the news in media is largely about foreign employment in the Gulf and Malaysia. Among the news published, one focused on a collaborative effort by municipality and project to provide compulsory and free insurance to Nepalese labourers working in India. The other article focused on how migrant workers end up paying higher premiums for limited coverage because of the poor quality of existing insurance products. In the article, Director General of Department of Foreign Employment pointed how “limited options” have created a “monopoly”. The article also highlights how outsourcing by the Insurance Board through a pool system has created a “syndicate and resulted in poor service delivery to migrant workers” (Nov 2019, The Kathmandu Post).

The other important intermediaries in Nepal’s labour migration context are remittance transfer agencies. Around eight articles related to such institutions were published during the study year, however, the articles discussed the size of remittances and not remittance service providers. Among those published, three discussed the use of hundi (an informal way of hand carrying money) as a preferred way to remit money, as the cost of remitting through formal channels is high, one spoke about efforts of local governments, financial institutions (cooperatives) and pilot projects on financial transfers aiming to formalise remittance transfers and decrease the cost of remittance and the avoid being duped. However, such reports did not include any representative from the remittance.

The news reports relied on studies conducted by agencies like Amnesty International, IOM and the ILO for information about the typical practices of intermediaries. They included various interviews with representatives of these organisations on International Migration Day, talking about the overall situation in Nepal and their work in the country. Information about the experiences of individual

migrants, provided by the Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC), National Network for Safe Migration, Pourakhi and similar organisations, was often used to give colour to the reporting and to make it more credible.

The newspapers provided space to advocacy agencies and civil society actors when the papers need more reinforcement on some human rights agenda they are advocating for. For example, representatives from civil society were given space within news piece that raised issues of repatriation of bodies or maltreatment of migrants by airlines.

4.2 FOCUS ON A FEW THEMATIC AREAS ONLY

When the newspapers discussed intermediaries, the recurring themes were government policy, changes in the law, investigations of recruitment agencies or penalties levied on them, fraudulent activities by recruitment agencies, fraudulent financial transactions, and to some extent the experiences and challenges of migrants themselves.

The majority of articles revolved around government actions. The newspapers reported on various government efforts to ensure migrants' rights and safety, along with the challenges involved in implementing such efforts. For example, reports on the progress on the MoU between Nepal and Malaysia were followed by articles which discussed various hurdles in effectively applying the standards.

We found that whenever the government hinted at introducing new laws, policies or programmes, or amending existing ones, the reporting on foreign employment increased dramatically. Examples include the introduction of a ban on foreign employment to Malaysia by Nepalese government. During the 15-month period of the government ban and the subsequent months when a MoU between Malaysia and Nepal was implemented, there was increased reporting on foreign employment. However, as time passes, these are not followed up and reporting decreases. The increased reporting focused on only migration towards Malaysia. Other destination countries were not given priority. Such reporting focused on the challenges in implementing legal and policy changes, along with analysis of earlier policies/acts. Similarly, the government's efforts to provide better and more efficient services, arrests related to fraudulent cases, criticisms on action to track down fraudulence are reported routinely.

The recurring theme concerning recruitment agencies was fraudulent activities like overcharging workers (including illegal charges), threatening workers with additional fees, or duping workers with false promises.

4.3 BIASED PORTRAYAL OF DIFFERENT ACTORS

The analysis finds that there is an implicit bias towards certain intermediaries in reporting. Biases (negative) are most apparent in the case of recruitment agencies and the governments and positive bias towards the migrants.

Recruitment agencies

Recruitment agencies were the intermediaries who received most negative attention in the newspapers. While we are aware of the fact that intermediaries' ethical action can play a critical role in making migration beneficial and safe for migrants and that recruitment agencies in Nepal do not always take actions in best interest of the migrants, there is a bias in reporting them.

Fraudulent financial activities such as cheating, overcharging and illegal charges, fines and compensation collected from the recruitment agencies are a common theme when recruitment agencies are covered in newspapers. Recruitment agencies are frequently referred to as 'brokers' or 'middlemen': terms which are also used interchangeably to refer to human traffickers (See for example, Jan 2020, Annapurna Post). This makes it possible to form a judgement about their portrayal in the print media. It is also likely to shape readers' perception of the agencies. This is likely to have a negative effect on the public's perception of recruitment agencies.

Given the volume of reporting on the subject, the term 'recruitment agency' may also summon up images of fraudulent financial activities. The collection of penalty fees from recruitment agencies, and the frequent use of words like 'imposition', gives an impression that the recruitment agents are responsible for almost all the challenges facing migrants. Among the articles we collected, there was only one that reported a migrant worker receiving an explanation from a recruitment agency charging high fees; even then, readers were not told what the explanation was (Dec 2019, The Kathmandu Post).

Recruitment agencies are also highlighted for issues around misinformation/not giving any information (such as about the incentives received in the jobs, the nature of the jobs, and the culture of destination countries) largely criticising them as responsible for migrants misery related to misinformation or lack of information but the views of the agencies themselves are not taken in these reporting.

Actions taken by recruitment agencies to ensure the safety of the migrants are hardly ever reported. During the study period, there was only one report which mentioned recruitment agencies' efforts to support migrant workers and that it was

able to bring 6 out of 27 people back home after an employer did not pay their salary on time.

This simplistic picture takes no account of the independent actions taken by employers in destination countries. In one report, which was about blacklisting employers in destination countries, it was noted that recruitment agencies also complain about the actions of employers at the destination (Dec 2018, The Kathmandu Post). Even so, issues raised regarding the employer seldom get reported. Even if they are, the recruitment agency in the origin country must take the blame for employers' behaviour.

Migrants

The focus of many articles is on migrant workers, who are often presented as a 'innocent migrant workers' or the victims of existing processes and practices by government, employers and recruitment agencies. In most cases, papers presenting migrant workers reiterate that recruitment agencies promised lucrative jobs, migrants became victims of this deceitful recruitment process and the government was unable to protect them. The articles do not critically analysing how migrants themselves took decisions for migration and if they gave priority to legal and safe migration pathways. For example in case of migrants, their own shortcomings in the migration and employment process are not analysed/mentioned.

Government

The media has portrayed many aspects of government policy positively. Almost all interventions carried out by the government were taken as decreasing the cost of migrants applying for work abroad and decreasing administrative red tape. One example is the establishment of labour offices in all seven provinces for distributing labour permits, decreasing the financial burden on applicants and eliminating the need to travel to Kathmandu. The steps taken to blacklist firms that were not taking care of migrant workers were all covered and lauded as "worthy measures" (Feb 2019, Republica).

Likewise, the introduction of an electronic token system and online queue system were hailed as interventions to create a hassle-free service for aspiring migrants were also reported. The Government of Nepal has been following a market friendly approach, where the majority of work is carried out by private sector actors, such as in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), and also completely controlling all aspects of recruitment process to foreign employment in countries like Japan. However we did not find any articles critically reflecting on these approaches. Mostly, the reporting only talked about individual cases, and did not discuss the positive and negative

aspects of these two approaches, or which one might be better for Nepalese migrants at large.

The media has hailed the amendment of the Foreign Employment Act, 2007, as a major reform. Likewise, newspaper articles also claimed that “the most important intervention came in the form of hiking the guarantee amount of recruiting agencies” (Dec 2019, The Kathmandu Post).

4.4 LACK OF PERSPECTIVE OF ALL ACTORS INVOLVED IN INTERMEDIARIES IN MEDIA

The review finds that, overall, newspapers rarely reported the voices of intermediaries when they reported on cases. When an instance where airline operators did not allow labour migrants to board a flight was reported, the airline operator was not quoted or given an opportunity to justify their action. Similarly, a report on the overcharging of insurance premiums did not include any quote from an insurance sector representative to explain why that was the case.

Of the 13 articles that reported fraudulent activities by recruitment agencies, it was found that only two articles talked about the reason frauds were committed and thus gave a fuller picture of the cases. In only one article, the newspaper provided a space for justification from the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA), the recruitment agency. Likewise, articles do not mention the opinion of recruitment agencies who have suffered from the increase of the guarantee amount or faced closure as a result of the government decision to shut down agencies that send less than 100 labour workers in a year (Feb 2019, Kantipur). The explanatory reason for overcharging fees is only sporadically mentioned when there is discussion on overcharging. The roles and efforts in the collection of compensation, registration and proceeding of fraud cases are not reported.

4.5 LACK OF REPORTING OF DESTINATION INTERMEDIARIES

There is a marked under-representation of news from the destination countries: for example, in the 103 number of relevant paper reviewed, there was no reporting about recruitment/ human resources/ placement agencies in the destination countries. Even for stories that were related to migrants’ challenges at the destination, there were no reports about the role of various intermediaries situated in the transit or the destination countries. For example, articles reporting on cheating by recruitment agents were focused only on actors in source countries. Situations in destination countries which might have caused actors in source countries to act in a

certain way were not reported. Neither was the role of various formal and informal actors who might have been involved in supporting/harming the migrants.

There were only three occasions where newspapers from destination countries were used for reporting. The destination countries' standpoint gave a better picture of the subject matter in those articles. There were many other articles which could have benefited from this approach.

The newspapers reported on employers in destination countries only after the government banned various employers for their unprofessional behaviour, and even then the reporting focused mainly on how many were banned and not on providing details on why they were illegal, how they operated and what their challenges and objectives were in such way of operating.

5 CONCLUSION

The emphasis of this working paper was to look at articles associated with foreign employment. Though the function of intermediaries is a collective act of various actors, the government and recruitment agencies were the prime focus in these news articles. This has created an environment where the public perception of intermediaries is limited to government and recruitment agencies and does not take account of other actors involved in the migration process. Also, the inconsistency over the word used for representing recruitment agencies such as “brokers”, “intermediaries” has created an ambiguous understanding on their role, image and undermines role of other actors.

Thematically, newspapers primarily reported on government policies, investigation on recruitment agencies for fraudulent activities, and experiences of migrants. Discourse on migration, hence is at forefront of public discussion only during the time when government took some action. In other times stories of migrants take a backseat in national reporting. Due to this nature, many stories are not followed up and as time goes by the rigour in reporting decreases.

By only focusing on few key themes on specific actors, actors are portrayed from a singular perspective which is already prevalent in society. For certain intermediaries a focus only on negative/positive has reinforced negative/positive images of them. Recruitment agents receive most negative attention through association with fraudulent financial activities. Migrants are portrayed as lacking agency in making decisions in choosing migration pathways and gullible from recruitment agents which guide them in the foreign employment process. Similarly, government action was positively presented where it claimed that it decreased the cost of migration and eased the process of going through administrative red tape.

The lack of diverse voices from other intermediaries reinforces the idea that there are only a few actors in migration intermediation. The lack of perspective from various intermediaries has meant that people do not understand a fuller picture of the story, do not get access to a wider perspective/analysis and their images of an actor and consequently the societal narrative on the actors are not entirely true. The lack of any comment from the various intermediary actors concerning their role and function in the migration process makes it hard for readers to form a balanced view or to know their position on the subject.

The focus entirely on actors in source countries is not helpful in giving the public a complete information of migration stories and creating a true picture of intermediaries of the migration process. On the few occasions when a newspaper sourced information or opinions from a destination country, readers were given a much better opportunity to grasp the reality of the situation described. There is a need for more collaboration between journalists in source and destination countries to give readers a comprehensive picture of migration intermediaries.

6 WAY FORWARD

It is evident from the analysis of newspaper articles over a period of 17 months that the writings in the nine newspapers selected are focused on just a few actors and themes. There is a need for similar understanding on the intermediation process and recognising many other actors in the intermediation process.

Similarly, there is an immediate need for a broader understanding of the intermediaries within journalists to cover wide array of actors involved in the intermediation process. This could be done by providing orientation to journalists to highlight the need of covering other actors, giving voices to actors, and writing both aspects of actors and their work.

Likewise, international agencies and news agencies can facilitate platforms where journalists from source and destination countries can collaborate to produce articles by giving both side of stories.

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Contact author

Karan Kunwar, Nepal Institute for Social and Environment Research
ahkaran@live.com



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Contact MIDEQ

Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR)
Coventry University, IV5, Innovation Village
Cheetah Road, Coventry, CV1 2TL UK; Tel. +44 24 7765 1182
E-mail: mideq@coventry.ac.uk