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Possibilities and Paradoxes of
Ethical Recruitment in
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**Can Recruitment be Fair?
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Nirvan Pradhan

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Can Recruitment be Fair? Possibilities and Paradoxes of Ethical Recruitment in the Eastern Himalayas

Nirvan Pradhan *

Introduction

In January 2022, on a crisp winter afternoon under clear blue skies, I walked up to the lobby of a shiny new hotel which had sprung up on Mall Road, Darjeeling. An ostentatious tea boutique adjoins the front entrance. Customers and tea connoisseurs dressed in dark winter coats and bright chequered mufflers were gazing at the light brown liquid in their glasses and slowly sipping their tea. Recently, the entire neighbourhood has undergone gentrification. An old dilapidating colonial-era school was demolished to make way for an opulent hotel. I entered the hotel lift unsure of the directions to the venue for a career-counselling event titled— “Work in Japan” for young people. As I crossed the lobby and proceeded towards the lift, the hotel guard implored me to wait as four young college students joined me.

On an overcrowded lift, I overheard their conversations about the best students leaving college midway through their undergraduate years to work abroad. Exiting the lift to enter a well-lit room with transparent windows was a large hall with seating arrangements for over 400 people. The stage was set for the event. Mr Yotoshi Hakamura, head of Nippon Airlines India, greeted and invited Darjeeling’s young people to work in Japan. He joked that people in Darjeeling looked just *like* the Japanese and that Darjeeling was already well-known in Japan for its tea. To present the logistics through which students could work in Japan, he was joined on the dais by an associate director of ARMS Incorporation¹— one of India’s largest recruitment firms, which organised seminars and workshops to recruit students for internships in Japan. They were given a detailed orientation to join the Technical Intern Training Program (hereafter TIPT), a training program for young people to intern in Japan. The TIPT program was initiated during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to India in 2017. Under the program, technical interns from India would be flown to Japan to be trained and work in hospitality, agriculture, manufacturing and other sectors. After the seminar, interested candidates were entreated to stay back to resolve queries. As I joined other students for post-seminar refreshments, interested candidates excitedly filled in application forms. Some students were interviewed that afternoon, ascertaining their qualifications and soft skills. A few were invited to visit the firm headquarters in the coming days. The emptying of villages, towns, and cities in the Eastern Himalayas is not only young people’s rural-to-urban migration but also a

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transnational migration outside the country. Young people are departing in large droves to lands of new opportunity. Recruitment firms, agencies and agents form a crucial part of the labour migrant industry in the Eastern Himalayas, responsible for hiring, training, sending, receiving and rehabilitating migrant workers.

In scholarly debates, the recruitment industry has become encompassed the more significant sector, including agents, skill developers, English teachers, healthcare workers, grooming schools, immigration officials, VFS officials and aspiring migrants (Hansen and Sørensen 2013; Spaan and Hillmann 2013). The recruitment industry is a part of the more significant migration industry, whose terminology can be traced back to 1977 (Lindquist 2010). Salt and Stein (1997) have argued that a “global business” and financial profit make the migration industry possible. Cohen argues that the migration industry encompasses private lawyers, travel agents, recruiters, organisers, fixers and brokers who sustain links between the sending and destination countries. Garapich (2008:735) conceptualises the migration industry as a service economy sector stimulating mobility and easing adaptation. Hernández-León (2013:25) has argued that the migration industry can be defined as an “ensemble of entrepreneurs who, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, provide a variety of services facilitating human mobility across international borders”. Recently, scholars contend that while migration is often equated with transnationality— issues of non-movement, deportation, social movements, faith-based organisations, immigration checks, climate-induced migration, forced returns and waiting are all a process of the migration experience (Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013; Baas and Yeoh 2018).

Recruitment is not uniform across different localities, geographies, cultures and historical contexts. Recruitment intersects, shapes, and is inevitably shaped by national, racial, caste (Desai and Dubey 2011; Parida and Madheswaran 2011), religious, class (Tuxen and Robertson 2019), ethnic, social and regional modalities. Strict governmental regulations do not make the recruitment industry disappear. On the contrary, more stringent policies mean more rigorous control— elevating the role of brokers who know the guidelines, procedures and the knowledge necessary to navigate the system (Faist 2014; Baas 2017). The formation of recruitment practices or a discussion on recruitment is inevitably linked to the political and cultural context in which it has been invariably produced, maintained and progressed. From a more critical perspective, it may seem obvious that the factors contributing to the recruitment and shaping of the field are the impact of neoliberalisation in the labour migration industry and the various checks and laws of the nation-state. However, these explanations remain fixated within the nation-state frame. International recruitment can only be grasped if one considers the broader spatial and temporal patterns of contemporary capitalism and the power of capital. Under new forms of neoliberalism, capital and statecraft are concentrated in global cities, while in-between, migrants are abandoned to their own devices (Vasantkumar 2017).

Building upon a body of scholarship concerned with post-educational landscapes and recruitment procedures in South Asia— in this chapter, I explore recruitment zones in the Eastern Himalayas as part of migration infrastructure within the more extensive global labour regimes. I argue that recruitment zones operate as affective spaces in transforming the discontent of educated young people into dreams of social mobility and upliftment through the economy of anticipation. Drawing on the biographies of aspiring migrants with college-level qualifications, who are either unemployed or employed in call centres or private jobs in Siliguri, I show how recruitment zones are a space in which young people are provided with a platform that while devalues their education also allows them to reclaim local visions of masculine success. Through an ethnographic study of recruitment practices in recruitment zones in the Eastern Himalayas between 2020 and 2022, this chapter explores critical factors in recruitment through interactions of aspiring migrant workers,

recruitment agencies and state policies. The selection of Siliguri for the study is primarily based on the city's central location, as it borders many international countries (Nepal, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh) and is developing as a gateway to new global frontiers. Most interviews and additional informal discussions were conducted with aspiring migrants, language school administrators, representatives of recruitment agencies and returning labour migrants. The majority of interviews were conducted in Siliguri, and some were conducted in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. In addition to interviews, observation of migration and recruitment practices in private agencies during interviews and training provided additional information. Additional material was collected from the analysis of laws and reports of the National Skill Development Corporation, records from the websites of recruitment agencies, sending organisations, and articles from Indian and international newspapers.

Various states, international organisations and non-governmental organisations underline the notion of “unfairness” and exploitation in international recruitment procedures. In this chapter, I argue that facilitating low-skilled, fair and ethical recruitment is contingent upon the more extensive migration infrastructure comprising state laws, employee requirements and notions of skills and practices of recruitment agents. Central to the understanding of labour recruitment in this chapter is recruitment zones. A recruitment zone constitutes the concrete economic locus where multi-national companies, recruitment agents, aspiring migrants, skill development companies, training centres, health agencies, police officers and visa and immigration agencies combine different resources in a specific way (add value) to make the aspiring migrant ready for the international market. These experiences and dealings carry significant implications for the everyday politics of money, labour and anticipation in the Eastern Himalayas.

This chapter begins with a discussion of *The Emigration Act* (1983)— an archaic Indian policy which remains distinctly outdated in the contemporary scenario. I argue that while India has the most significant number of international migrants, over 30 million² migrants are afflicted by the absence of a standard migration policy. In global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of standard operating procedures for international migrants brings additional challenges for labour migrants. In the essay, I argue that, amongst other factors, recruitment is shaped by the political economy of anticipation in recruitment zones. This anticipation of working abroad becomes fertile grounds for producing new dreams and desires. In recruitment zones, skilling is facilitated and mediated by various actors, networks and technologies.

In the third section, I argue that state regulations and inter-government agreements shape vital recruitment components in the migration infrastructure. I demonstrated this with the Indo-Japan deal (2017) on the TIPT program, revealing three dimensions of the migration infrastructure to illustrate the apparatus of migration infrastructure. In conclusion, I argue that skill development institutions work with recruitment agencies— training workers to become employable. In this manner, recruitment agencies are breaking down the seemingly global urban workplace skills into teachable components of language, attitude, deportment, demeanour, etiquette and appearance.

India's Outdated Migration Policy

Even amongst the different sub-regions of the world, South Asia accounts for the most significant number of migrants. By the current global estimates, there are around 281 million international migrants, about 3.6 per cent of the worldwide population (World Migration Report 2020). Asia hosts about 86 million international migrants. In South Asia, migration is a dominant feature affecting policies, inter-state relations, sharing of natural resources and economic ties. Estimates show that about 43.9 million people live outside their country of origin in the region. Ten of the most extensive

twenty migration corridors in Asia emanate from South Asia. South Asia hosts about 3.6 million refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR 2019). Most of the refugees reside in their neighbouring states. Pakistan hosts a large number of Afghan and Iranian refugees. Bangladesh hosts many refugees from Rohingya and Myanmar, who constitute the fourth largest refugee population worldwide (UNHCR 2019).

Achieving meaningful fair recruitment is difficult in international labour markets because it is an inherently hierarchical industry. International recruitment in India has dual characteristics because of the regulatory oversight under The Emigration Act of 1983 and the neoliberal character of the global labour market. In India, recruitment is regulated under The Emigration Act 1983.³ According to the Act's provisions, the Central Government appoints the Protector General of Emigrants and can define the area under which the authority of the Protector of Emigrants can function. Section 3 of the Act stipulates the appointment of a "Protector General of Emigrants" and many "Protectors of Emigrants".⁴ The Emigration Act, 1983 (Section 10) specifies that no *recruitment agent*⁵ shall carry on the *recruitment business* except under and by a certificate issued by the registering authority, i.e. the Protector General of Emigrants. The Act stipulates that no employer shall recruit any citizen of India for employment in any country or place outside India except through a recruitment agent competent under this Act to make such recruitment. A formal recruitment agency must be registered with the Protector General of Immigrants. This requires paying a registration fee of Rs 25,000 and depositing a security amount of Rs 50 lakhs. This amount can be used for meeting expenses incurred in the event of repatriation to India of emigrants recruited by the applicant.

As an ethnographer conducting fieldwork in recruitment agencies and on larger recruitment practices in the Eastern Himalayas, countless migrants who shared some portion of their journey informed me they went through unlicensed agents possessing no recruitment licence. Dawa Sherpa, a thirty-seven-year-old woman, was instructed to enter Dubai on a tourist visa for two weeks, wherein another agent would convert her tourist visa into a work visa. In Dubai, she faced legal hurdles and troubles because of the unscrupulous means of this unlicensed agent. Since licensed recruitment agencies charge higher recruitment fees while promising lower salaries, most aspiring workers choose illegal agents who charge lower recruitment fees while promising higher wages. Moreover, age restrictions, English skills and gender discourage private agencies from accepting certain migrants who end up hiring the services of unlicensed agents.⁶ Bina Thapa, a forty-year-old migrant, worked as a house helper in Hong Kong. Returning after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, she shared that she received reduced pay than the stipulated salary in her official contract. Moreover, aspiring migrants without any financial capital are allowed to fly abroad under a "free visa" scheme wherein the unlicensed agent would offer to pay for a passport, visa, flight tickets and other expenses on the condition that the aspiring migrant would return the investment by paying about six months of their salary. Thus, there are frequent violations of the Act.

Regulatory oversight for violations of The Emigration Act (1983) is inadequate to keep pace with recruitment and manipulation in the recruitment economy leading to frequent abuses and exploitation.⁷ The Government's measures for checking fake recruitment agencies/agents in India have been inadequate and unsatisfactory. First, the government only retains data on Indian emigrants, holding Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) category passports and legal proceedings to 18 notified ECR countries for overseas employment, maintained in the e-Migrate system. Thus, the Indian government does not keep a record of workers sent illegally if they have bypassed the procedure established by the Government. Second, after receiving complaints from migrants and relatives of migrants who have been cheated and fleeced— the government forwards them to the State governments and police for apprehending and prosecuting illegal agents. As per official records,

the number of complaints against unregistered/illegal agents during 2014 and 2016 was 596, of which 485 cases were referred to the state governments for action. Out of these cases, the state governments only sought 61 prosecution sanctions which the Central government provided.⁸ Due to a lack of a standard migration policy and a robust regulatory oversight committee, unscrupulous recruitment agencies continue recruiting migrants using nefarious means and methods.

India's lack of a standard migration policy increases migrant vulnerabilities in crises. This was glaringly made evident by the challenges, troubles and difficulties that international migrants faced during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Wright 2020). For instance, many low-skilled workers were victims of “wage theft” because of the COVID-19 lockdowns (ILO 2021). Wage theft refers to a “variety of wage and benefit-related violations committed against migrated workers by employers and recruitment agencies” (Report on Wage Theft 2021:21). Once workers returned home due to constraints imposed by the pandemic, wage-theft migrants were unable to take legal recourse due to the physical distance, differences in legal systems across countries and the territorial boundaries of state authorities. While migrants from lower-income countries faced wage theft, India's inadequate migration policy robbed them of unpaid wages. According to the JWT India Report, *Empty-handed and Demoralized: New Evidence of wage theft among Indian return migrants during COVID-19* (Irudaya Rajan and Akhil CS 2021)— “India's response to the grievances of migrant workers was poor compared to other origin countries, especially regarding labour disputes”. Most bilateral agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) were ignored during the COVID-19 crisis.

By examining India's official migration policy, I have shown that vulnerable migrants are the biggest victims of India's outdated migration policy. In the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian migrants died in large numbers as they slogged as front-line workers but were the last to be vaccinated—much later than the native population. Therefore, India should *adopt* a new migration policy attempting to improve labour laws that enforce workers' rights at work, labour laws and bilateral agreements, *especially* during times of crisis— when migrants are the most vulnerable.

Recruitment Zones as Economy of Anticipation

Less is known about the actual process of labour recruitment (Lindquist 2010).⁹ As a researcher conducting fieldwork on transnational labour markets, one question followed: how do I get a job abroad? I found myself grappling with an honest and succinct answer. I usually suggested certain countries possessing superior labour laws and agents and agencies that were best avoided. How does one get a job in a company abroad? A particular mystery surrounds the recruitment process regarding how aspiring migrants procure jobs. This section sheds light on the procedure of recruitment in the Eastern Himalayas. In this first section, I argue that recruitment zones are affective spaces that provide an opportunity to invest and work in transnational labour markets, transforming the discontent of educated young people into dreams of social mobility and upliftment. In this sense, recruitment zones function as an economy of anticipation for young people. Through ethnography and participant observation in recruitment agencies in Siliguri and Darjeeling, I describe the dealings and practices through which agencies function when choosing to accept, refuse, train and prepare aspiring migrants.

I visited Akash Talent Agency for fieldwork between 2020 and 2022. This company was conceptualised in 2008 and incorporated in 2010. Its headquarters is in Siliguri, Darjeeling. The company website lists it as engaged in —talent management, talent acquisition, skill development, graduate recruitment and internship setting. The primary focus is the North-Eastern states of India.

As the base, Siliguri actively recruits people from Darjeeling, Siliguri and Dooars. Legal restrictions hinder the recruitment of Bhutanese citizens, although they get many enquiries from them.

I met Sahil Lepcha— an aspiring migrant enrolled in Akash Talent Agency in Salbari, Siliguri, over a cup of tea in an open roadside cafe in October 2020. In his mid-twenties, he is boyish-faced but speaks with a grave voice. Surrounded by tea gardens, a few restaurants operate in the area, which gets crowded in the evenings. The autumn evening was cool and pleasant as customers vied for the waiters' attention to order snacks. Over a plate of chicken chowmein, *aloo parantha*, chicken momo and black tea— he shared his primary motivation for leaving his private job in Siliguri and hiring the services of Akash Talent agency.

I graduated from a college in Siliguri, and like other educated young people, I had dreams of landing a good job and settling here in Siliguri. There are few government jobs here, and people squander numerous years studying. I was young and fresh out of college a few years ago. I graduated with umpteen ambitions and hopes. But now, I am frustrated with my job and life. I have experience working with three different companies. I work in a private position in Siliguri, and my monthly salary is about Rs 8,000. No employer pays more than that.

I understand Siliguri is a tier-3 city. My present salary would have been adequate about ten years earlier, but it's not feasible to survive with that now. It's just not enough. The prices of everything have leapt. There are no *prospects* of growth in Siliguri. Even if I go to Bangalore or Delhi, the maximum companies will pay me is 25-30k. With that amount, I have to pay higher rent, groceries, entertainment, phone and electricity bills. I might break even, but I will have no savings. For young people like us, it's not worth it. Look at all the big shops in Darjeeling. Are even one of the shops owned by locals? It's all owned by outsiders—Marwaris and Bengalis. I plan to go to *bahira* (outside) with the agency's help. I expect to earn and save about 60 k per month. At least I can save by working abroad and investing here. My friends have been working there for two years. I heard it's nice there. I will work for four years and might come back.

Jamie Cross (2014:6) reminds us that “contemporary capitalism is built upon dreams as well as nightmares”. For young men like Sahil, there is certain despair in having to continue slogging in private jobs in Siliguri. Despite graduating six years ago, his salary has remained constant in Siliguri— with no promotion or salary hike possibilities. Working in Bangalore was a disappointing experience for him. Insufficient income and lack of career development were the main reasons for wanting to migrate. He estimates his future as a known condition, where he insidiously wastes away his potential. He perceives the recruitment agencies as having the expert knowledge to navigate the migration process and provide a job. The only possibility where Sahil envisions a brighter future is working *abroad*— for short-term profits like many of his friends. He views migration as “optimisation”: his moral responsibility to secure the best possible future (Rose 2007). A defining quality of our current moment is the characteristic state of anticipation— thinking and “living towards the future” (Adams *et al.* 2009:246). Anticipation permeates how Sahil thinks, feels, plans and addresses his current problems. Here, the anxiety about the future takes effect on the political economy of transnational recruitment zones. His anticipation propels him to act towards the future— in which personal respect and posterity are at stake. In neoliberal India, anticipation and hope for the future govern the present. The future is seen as glorious, while the present predicament is experienced as drudgery.

Migration has become the responsibility of young people to secure their best possible future. While “affect and emotions are difficult to capture” (Datta 2020:50)— affective phenomena of present discontent and future dreams are clearly articulated, which can be inferred and especially felt, circulating in the recruitment zones inhabited by the aspiring young people. As Sahil grapples with

uncertainty in private companies in Siliguri, it leads him to the anticipation of migration as an affective state, “opening up multiple tracks in to the future” (Masco 2020:35). Here, recruitment zones operate as *in-between spaces* where they cater for young workers’ demands and expectation of a higher paying job, social mobility and economic security while on the other hand doing a business by paying careful attention to the nation’s rules, regulations and policy requirements on visa regulations.

In November 2021, I waited expectantly for Sherab Yolmo, a 23-year-old aspiring migrant. Today is his first day visiting the office of Global Talent Plus, a recruitment agency in Matigara, Siliguri. He arrives late, and we meet outside a Pizza Hut outlet. Wearing black Chelsea boots, sky blue jeans and a navy-blue jumper over a pink tee-shirt, he gives me a cheerful greeting. A thin gold earring hangs on his left ear. He leads me to a building and proceeds toward the lift. The guards ignore us as they seem engaged in their conversation and tomfoolery. We get down to the second floor of the building. We enter the recruitment agency’s office, and I am immediately taken in by the well-lit room. A reception area is in front of the door, manned by a man and a woman. The receptionist asks us to register our details. I fill in the entry diary and glance at the “Work in Poland, Europe” posted seductively in front of the reception desk. I am given a registration form soliciting personal details—name, email, height, weight, phone number, education qualification, and past work experience.

I start observing the notices on a large green board as Sherab answers a call from his friend. I quiz Sherab about why he wants to leave Siliguri. He conveys the issue of insufficient wages. Formerly, he was working in a start-up company entering the regional market. He grumbles about Siliguri’s trivial salary and poor prospects for on-the-job advancement. He then launches into a long “complaint” about how inflation made everything more expensive while his salary in the private sector plateaued (Ahmed 2021).

The board on the wall exhibited two maps of Europe. One was a colourful map showing the nation-states of the European Union. A black and white copy of a visa of a former trainee was pinned to the wall. Below it was written in bold letters— “Slovakian Visa”. Colourful pictures of smiling passed-out trainees from the region seated on a flight are captioned “Poland, December 2020”. A long list declared the names of people, their date of birth and their visa numbers successfully sent by the company. Inferring from their birthdates, most of the migrants were in their early twenties. A soft-featured employee, wearing square black glasses in her early forties, sat us down and began asking questions about Sherab’s education and work experience. Extremely polite, she begins to explain the prospective destinations available to us.

Agent: “Where would you like to go?”.

Sherab: “What are the options?”.

Agent: “Currently, we have vacancies in Europe and the Middle East”.

Sherab: “*Europai jum hola* (I think I would prefer to go to Europe)”.

Agent: “Okay. In Europe, we have vacancies in Slovakia, Poland and Croatia”.

She takes a paper from a black folder and begins explaining Slovakia’s work opportunities. Sliding a job advertisement for the post of a food production worker in Slovakia across the table, she starts with an overview of the job. The job listing held detailed information about the —expected pay, salary scale, accommodation arrangements, employer details, food arrangements, uniform, medical insurance details, working hours, leaves, contract period, probation period, and the documents required for processing a visa application for working in the European Union. The agent then took out a blank sheet of paper and listed the steps through which the recruitment agency

would work alongside Sherab to process his application. The steps were: a pre-interview taken by the manager assessing his personality, aptitude, and intelligence; document verification; medical test¹⁰; initial payment; application form sent to the employer in Europe; signing of the contract; personality development classes; skill training and testing; embassy interview training and final departure. The agent discusses that Sherab would earn about Rs 80,000 per month and meet all expenses; he would still be saving about Rs 60,000 (six times his average salary in Siliguri). Sherab coyly asks about the recruitment fees. While the company covers the training, medical insurance, travel insurance and flight tickets to Europe, the total sum would cost about Rs 3 lakh rupees. Here, capital flows “up” as choosing to work in Dubai would only cost Sherab about Rs 40,000.

In recruitment zones, selling dreams is also work or labour charged with charisma, spin and seduction (Cross and Heslop 2019). After enquiring more about the job and training details, we leave two hours later. As we exited the building, Sherab seemed more buoyant as his queries were answered in detail, and he seemed convinced of a higher-paying job in Europe awaiting him shortly. For Sherab, the future was palpable in the present. In recruitment zones, anticipation reterritorializes and expands the domains and sites of the future across space and time.

Contemporary capitalism is built upon dreams and well as “anxiety about the capitalist future” (Cross 2015:424). Consequently, our global economy is underpinned by an “abundance of futures” in places across the globe (Rosenberg and Harding 2005:9). Divergent dreams of a stable future coalesce in and around these recruitment zones in ways that make flows of capital more effective, shaping the future of young people through aspirations and dreams. For Sherab, the anticipation of working abroad is not just betting on the future, “it is a moral economy in which the future sets the conditions of possibility for action in the present, in which the future is inhabited in the present” (Adams *et al.* 2009:249). Through the display of the job listings and demonstrating a blueprint of the procedures for departure, the future arrives for Sherab as already formed in the present— as if the high-paying job has already been secured. Recruitment zones are affective zones where young workers like Sherab, burdened with anxieties and discontent, are reassured of a brighter future. Recruitment zones forecast changing lived conditions out onto future time horizons, merging expectations with prediction and fusing desire with fear for alternative outcomes. Even before the training begins, recruitment zones are affective spaces where anxiety, pessimism, cynicism and hopelessness are *transformed*—into hopes, dreams, optimism and conviction. Sherab later remarked: “Sometimes, I feel so scared about my future. If I stay here, I am doomed. *If I get married, budi ra nani lai palnu parcha. Yo barab hazar ko job ley key garnu?* (If I get married, I have to take care of my wife and children. What will I do with the job of Rs 12,000?). It’s better to hustle abroad than in India. I am not particularly excited about working abroad but given my situation, that’s the best option for me”. Thus, recruitment zones are spaces of imagination, hopes, aspiration and dreams in which migrants “construct and assemble possible future worlds for themselves” from the available resources and agencies (Cross 2014:9).

Scholars closely interrogate the rapid increase in the number of recruitment agencies in India regarding the economies, illegality, exploitation and malpractice. During the last decade, the number of recruitment agencies and agents has soared. As of March 2022, 1653 recruitment agencies were registered with the Overseas Employment Division of the Ministry of External Affairs.¹¹ However, recruitment agencies are not structured by finance and its calculative logic alone— as these interpretations do not capture the breaths of “future-oriented” aspirations in play in the spaces (Cross 2015:424). Instead, recruitment zones are uniquely charged spaces of conviction and anxiety about the aspiring migrant’s future. They are social spaces in which aspiring migrants attempt to know and master the unknowable future with a blueprint of the job offer, salary scale, employer

details and expected earnings that far outnumber their salary. These are strengthened based on the opening of transnational labour markets with the technologies of planning, calculation, investment and prediction, broadening the expectation of future profits by mapping future earnings. We become aware of the recruitment agency's success in capitalism on social and cultural convention rather than in abstract economic theory.

The above vignettes shed light on how capitalism is made and sustained through this economy of anticipation in recruitment zones. The above account focuses on the micro-social transactions and interactions and the terms and conditions under which young men and women sell their labour to multinational companies through recruitment agencies. Recruitment zones are spaces which connect socially and spatially unconnected social fields. *Recruitment zones* operate on an economy of anticipation in which prospective migrants construct imaginary future worlds for themselves, establishing the zone as a promissory infrastructure (Appadurai 1996). They are affective spaces in which young people confronted with the devaluation of their education turn to convert their discontent into “exuberant dreams of private accumulation” (Mitchell 1999). The economy of anticipation in recruitment zones shapes relations of capital investment, where aspiring young people invest a hefty sum for acquiring a transnational job in the future in a labour market abroad. Anticipation of employment in a future country “names a particular self-evident futurism in which the presents are necessarily understood as contingent upon... a future that which may or may not be known for certain, but still be acted on nonetheless” (Adams *et al.* 2009:247). Speculative acquisition of a job in a foreign market exists made with the hope of gain and risk of loss.

The economy of anticipation is not only tied to aspiration, hope and preparation but also the opposite— the unanticipated, evoking uncertainty and anxiety. Aspiring migrant workers are vulnerable to drastic changes in the world economy due to their precarious position. For instance, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Sahil confessed to feeling anxious about his future in Slovakia and the recruitment company reneging on its promises. Studies illustrate that potential migrants have unrealistically high expectations of income opportunities and underestimate the costs and risks associated with foreign employment (Sharma 2013). Moreover, they overlook the complex relationship between marginality and migration, ignoring how foreign occupation increases discrimination (Kern 2014). However, aspiring migrants are ready to invest money for a livelihood abroad. Recruiters recognise this fact and seek to benefit from it. This economy of anticipation drives recruitment zones where young people, failing to realise local visions of masculine success, turn to migration to pursue dreams of well-paying jobs, personal enrichment, improvement of social standing and upward social mobility. Anticipation here is the “palpable sense that things could be (all) right if we leverage new spaces of opportunity, reconfiguring the possible” (Adams *et al.* 2009: 256).

Educated graduates across the Eastern Himalayas increasingly feel convinced that working in India has failed to live up to promises of progress. For these young people, Indian cities are experienced as a space of immobility and stagnation— rather than mobility and progress. Like Sahil and Sherab, other young people are driven by everyday modern dreams of economic and social upliftment and re-ordering turn to recruitment zones. They are neoliberal dreams of accessing the good life, of everyday hopes and aspirations for improvement in ways of living, the upward movement through accumulating wealth and status, social mobility and material security and betterment. None of these dreams is accessible by continuing to work in private jobs in Siliguri. Private sector jobs are seen to characterise spaces of uncertainty. Thus, India's recruitment zones allow labour recruiters to meet discontent with young workers. To that end, recruitment zones are sites of the economy of anticipation in that they crystallise our attention to how aspiring young

people orient themselves to their future in specific ways, expecting the promised future to materialise and converge.

Notes

¹ ARMS Incorporation is India's leading company in rendering skill development and training courses. It is one of the licensed Sending Organisation that offers a course on Technical Intern Training Program (TIPT) and corporate Japanese language training to individuals. A Sending Organisation identifies eligible and competent youths and upgrades their skillset through the TIPT program in Japan. See: <https://arms-incorporation.com> (Accessed 12 January 2021)

² Lok Sabha Debates, *Violation of Labour Laws*, Session Number XI, 22 March 2017, https://eparlib.nic.in/handle/123456789/698165?view_type=browse (Accessed 23 January 2022)

³ The passage of this Act replaced the Emigration Act of 1922.

⁴ There are Protectors of Emigrants in Chandigarh, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Cochin, Kolkata, Mumbai, Raibareli and Thiruvananthapuram. All of them have extended jurisdictions in more than one state and/or Union Territory. https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/Contact_Details_nov_2017_new.pdf (Accessed 10 January 2022)

⁵ This Act (Section 2. l) defines a recruitment agent as a “person engaged in India in the business of recruitment for an employer and representing such employed with respect to any matter in relation to such recruitment including dealings with persons so recruited or desiring to be so recruited”.

⁶ Transnational jobs require specific skill sets and come with restrictions. Some jobs are reserved for girls, some for boys, some have age restrictions, and some require English spoken and written skills.

⁷ Pankaj Chowdhary raised this issue of duping recruitment agencies in the Lok Sabha on 2 August 2017. He raised the issue of “(a) whether cases of duping of workers who were willing to work abroad by the recruitment agencies have come to the notice of the Government; (b) if so, the number of such cases surfaced during the last two years and the current year; The Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs V. K. Singh replied, “(a) & (b) It has been reported by the Indian Missions that they do receive complaints from Indian migrant workers regarding violations of contractual terms, adverse working conditions, medical and insurance-related problems and non-payment/less payment/delayed payment/withholding of salaries etc. On receipt of such complaints, the Missions take up the matter with the concerned sponsor/ Employers and the local authorities to redress these grievances. Suppose the emigrant is recruited through a registered Recruiting Agent. In that case, Show-cause notice is served on registered Recruiting Agents against whom complaints are received, and the Recruiting Agent is directed to settle/resolve the complaint. According to the government data presented in the Lok Sabha, in 2015, 61 show-cause notices were issued to registered recruitment agents under the Emigration Act, 1983. In 2016, 174 and 2017 (up to 30.06.2017), 100 show-cause notices were issued to registered recruitment agents. See Lok Sabha Debates, *Duping by Recruitment Agencies*, Session Number XII, 2 August 2017, https://eparlib.nic.in/handle/123456789/705672?view_type=browse (Accessed 15 March 2022).

⁸ See Lok Sabha Debates, *Duping by Recruitment Agencies*, Session Number XII, 2 August 2017, https://eparlib.nic.in/handle/123456789/705672?view_type=browse (Accessed 15 March, 2022).

⁹ A large-scale ambivalence exists regarding the performance and the practices of recruitment agencies. Some instances of transparency in recruitment and instances of landing good jobs were also common in the field. In a nutshell, the performance of recruitment varied, depending on professional enterprises or informal agents. Often, “the unregistered agents suffer from the worst reputation” (Kern and Böker 2015:165).

¹⁰ The medical health check-up is a comprehensive, detailed exam that monitors the blood, sugar and all reports. Recently, they even offered alcohol addiction tests, psychological tests, and background checks on the recruits. The Police verification for labour migrants is done by police officers which is laced with corruption and extortion by officers.

¹¹ <https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/raList.action> <https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/raList.action> (Accessed 20th February, 2022)

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