Nepalis to El Norte: Questions for the emerging trend of Nepali migration to the United States via Latin America

Andrew Nelson
University of North Texas

In this paper, I explore the research possibilities for a relatively unknown yet growing phenomenon of Nepali migratory routes to the United States via Latin America. While it is no secret that Nepalis are increasingly entering into foreign labor migration schemes that contribute to nearly one-quarter of the country’s GDP, these routes tend to be limited to Asian parts of the world, such as India, the Arabian Gulf, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan. Although labor migration of Nepalis to the United States has existed for some time, it has tended to be based on plane travel via tourist, student, employment or diversity visas. However, as United States immigration officials continue to tighten visa regulation in the post 9-11 era, new avenues of entering the country through undocumented means have emerged for Nepali migrants who have joined a trend of Indian citizens traveling to the United States via Latin American routes. In May 2011, Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, estimated that Indians accounted for one out of three non-Mexican undocumented immigrants apprehended at US borders. From 2004 to 2011, the number apprehended Indians grew from 2,777 to 5,953. Although Nepalis account for a much lower proportion of South Asians apprehended at US borders over the last decade, an increasing number of news stories and research reports have attested to their increasing presence in this dangerous and exploitative migration route.

The Latin American migratory route begins in South Asia, in such places as Kathmandu for Nepali citizens. There the aspiring migrants pay brokers to arrange travel and linkages to transnational trafficking networks. Often, migrants initially travel to Delhi where they are provided with Indian, Malaysian or Singaporean passports in order to gain entry without visas into select Latin American countries, such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Guatemala that have relaxed visa requirements. From there, the migrants travel onwards to Asian gateways, such as Doha, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, or Singapore, and then to African or European cities where they embark on sea or air voyages across the Atlantic. Once in Latin
America, the migrants enter into a new set of trafficking structures aided by brokers, drivers, safe house operators, and ‘coyotes’ who work to transport undocumented migrants into the United States from Mexico. They also encounter the state apparatus of immigration officials, border police and detention centers and must interact with people of multiple national identities and languages. While the specific destinations and agents of this risky voyage constantly shift in response to changing national laws and regulations, the structures and conditions are based on pre-existing networks of human and illegal commodity exchanges moving from south to north. Significantly, as regulation and surveillance of trafficking increases so too does the demand and exploitation of migrants seeking the help of underground agents, often connected to drug cartels in Mexico.

This paper is based on secondary research into the accounts of Nepali-Latin American migration with the aim of articulating methods and questions for future research. I am particularly interested in how this phenomenon reveals unexpected cultural interactions and political-economic outcomes. This case reminds us that transnational migration is not simply limited to the cosmopolitan elite just as international labor flows are not confined to patterns of Global South to North, or periphery to core, movements. Rather, the study of Nepali migrants in Latin American countries provokes a number of key questions for understanding interactions within the Global South. How do Latin American states deal with an influx of South Asians? How do the informal networks of South Asian labor agents and Latin American ‘coyotes’ negotiate across cultural and continental barriers? And finally, how do migrants endure the journey alienated from social networks and cultural-linguistic commonalities?