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# Making mobility a market: an economic sociology of migration brokerage

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 This dissertation develops an economic sociological perspective on the ongoing practices and processes of migrant labor brokerage in Nepal. It utilises Nepal as an instrumental case study to analyse recent developments in the way labour migration is organised transnationally by profit-seeking actors known as brokers or intermediaries. Existing scholarly work in the fields of sociology and migration studies exhibits a bias towards a network-oriented approach to explaining brokerage. Such a perspective assumes that brokers persist in filling structural holes or gaps in social relationships, and takes for granted the institutional arrangements and power dynamics that create space for brokerage. Challenging these assumptions, this thesis introduces a market-based perspective to understand how brokerage emerges and persists in Nepal. Through ethnographically informed qualitative research methods, this study reveals that the Nepalese state plays a crucial role in facilitating and promoting labour migration for developmental incentives. A review of the historical relationship between the state and brokers, as well as brokerage practices in Nepal, sheds light on market-based strategies for the institutionalisation of labour migration. The state is shown to organise and consolidate the migrant recruitment industry to indirectly regulate the emigration of migrant workers. This insight has implications for our understanding of

emerging supply-side interventions and of the structuring of migration-based markets. By placing the interaction between the state and the market at the core of its analysis, this study also sheds light on the scope and limitations of market regulation and the issue of control within the Nepalese migration industry. The state's inability to fully observe and monitor brokerage practices further creates the possibility of activities that potentially endanger the well-being of migrant workers. Consequently, the study argues that the interaction between the state and the recruitment industry presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities for Nepalese migrant workers. This research reveals how brokerage practices are deeply embedded in specific institutional settings, it demonstrates the inadequacy of network-driven theories in explaining why brokers persist, and explores the consequences of such intermediation on the labour process and the experiences of mobility among migrants. By examining migration through this lens, this dissertation advances our understanding of brokerage as a phenomenon within social and economic relationships.

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## INDEX

**Keywords:** labour migration, brokerage, development, Nepal, low-skilled mobility, precarious work

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### SANDHYA AS

Dr Sandhya AS is currently working as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Sociology, University of Duisburg-Essen. She teaches BA and MA courses on economic sociology, migration and perceptions of crisis, globalisation, and global futures, as well as transnational governance of labour. She is currently working on her research project titled 'social construction of (migrant) contracts' where she applies an economic sociological framework to the study of contracts. These agreements form the basis of migrants' transnational migration and cross-border employment relations. This research delves into the multifaceted dimensions of these agreements, including the tensions, conflicts of interest, and negotiations that surround them. Her research sheds light on the profound impact contracts have on the well-being of migrants in transit, addressing critical issues in the contemporary migration landscape.