International Institute of Social Studies

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# (Digital) Diasporic Social Networks of Nepalese Immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area of California:
## An Ethnographic Examination of Informal Social Protection

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# Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the co-ethnic social networks of Nepalese immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly with respect to how diasporic social networks help immigrants secure social protection upon arrival in the US. Through a (digital) ethnographic approach such as browsing of diasporic Facebook groups, participant observation at diasporic gatherings, and semi-structured interviews, this study interrogated what role diasporic social networks play for the lives of Nepalese immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly to address precarity and secure informal social protection. The study found that kinship and friendship networks as well as diasporic social networks and digital forums form an arrival infrastructure for newcomer immigrants in the US through informational and social support for housing and employment. Furthermore, the study documented the financial, legal, and social precarity that Nepalese immigrants narrated, and found that diasporic networks can be a source of social support in these situations though they can also lead to further dependent relations and exploitation. Another important finding is that Facebook groups in the Nepalese diaspora are essential forums for spreading and accessing information as well as gathering financial and material support. The study also found that Nepalese diaspora organizations support the socialization and strengthening of social capital of the community, though representational gaps and caste-based dynamics as well as veteran-newcomer power dynamics permeate. Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that symbolic boundaries of diasporic networks based on notions of deservingness also condition social support and can create dependent and exploitative dynamics. Lastly, the study found that members of the community believe the Nepalese immigrant community should be better informed of state-provisioned services and resources. Overall, the findings of the study illuminate the centrality of social networks in the migration and arrival process of Nepalese immigrants in the US. The study finds that diasporic social networks is an important source of informal social protection, though due to power dynamics and exclusion, must be complemented through access to other sources of social protection as well, particularly state provided. Recommendations targeted at the state include allowing work authorization for international students and asylum applicants as well as increased outreach to newcomer immigrants with targeted services. Recommendations to community leaders include outreach to local authorities and service providers, organizing targeted social support programs, and increased representation of youth, women, and 'caste-oppressed' individuals in decision-making.

## Relevance to Development Studies

This topic is relevant to Development Studies as it explores the nexus of social networks, social protection, and migration as narrated through the individual experiences of immigrants themselves upon arriving and settling into their destination context. Especially with an increase in people on the move across the world fleeing from economic destitution, instability, and violence whilst searching for opportunities and access to social services, the intersection between social protection and migration in development studies is of timely importance. Issues of social protection are an essential component of social policy and development studies, particularly with respect to the accessing of formal welfare provisions, reduction of risk, pooling of resources, and social support. This ethnographic research illustrates how (digital) social networks form a social safety net for immigrants helping them face financial, social, and/or legal precarity. Relevant concepts to the field of development studies include precarity, social networks, and social support.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Kamal arrived in the United States in 2013 as one of the lucky few recipients of the Diversity Visa. He explained to me how his life started anew upon his arrival in the US. He told me. *"You know, you don't have anyone who would even call me 'ton' who would even call me like 'timi'* [i] *[…] You have to start over. You're orphaned. You have no social network. You've got to build everything up yourself."* Through social networks built up after his arrival in the US, Kamal managed to navigate life in the US and protect against various risks via diaspora networks for himself and his family. Now a prominent realtor and community leader in the Nepalese diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, Kamal is a key figure, having constructed a new community center, organizing events for the wider diaspora, and frequently posting information in various Facebook groups. Often on the phone with newcomers and acquaintances within the diasporic network, Kamal also helps newcomer immigrants get on their feet, connecting them to job opportunities, housing information, and other social networks. Perhaps unintentionally, Kamal has become a migration entrepreneur, helping newcomers settle, and has become a key part of the social infrastructure for Nepalese migration to the US.

The role of social networks in the field of migration studies is well established, as pioneered by Massey (1993). A social networks perspective on migration also allows for an understanding of migration beyond the individual and rather as a "social product" (Boyd, 1989, p.642). Social networks play an important role in pre-migration, transit, post-migration, and transnational engagements of individuals and communities (Bilecen and Lubbers, 2021; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sørensen, 2013; Massey et al. 1987; Sha, 2021). Social networks are also essential for (im)migrants' securing of social protection in dynamic resource environments including the state, NGOs, market, and family (Levitt et al., 2023). Empirical research has found that (im)migrants often face heightened vulnerabilities living in their destination context due to specific circumstances and risks of exploitation they encounter during their stay abroad, with spatial, socio-cultural, and socio-political determinants of vulnerability (Delpy, 2024; Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003).

This project seeks to document the experiences of Nepalese immigrants on their differing migration histories, post-migration struggles and journeys, and the role of the Nepalese community in (not) providing social support. With respect to the literature, this study seeks to respond to the ambivalences in the literature about social support, power dynamics, and exclusion within diasporic networks. Examining social protection delivered through diasporic social networks, this research project engages with Nepalese immigrants' lives in the US, particularly with respect to their use of social networks to reduce precarity and set up their live in the US, such as securing employment and housing. Having grown up in the SFBA with close contact to the emerging Nepalese diaspora, this project was motivated by a personal desire to (re)connect with the community and to learn from people's perceptions, experiences, and challenges relating to diasporic social networks of support. To do this, I employed a (digital) ethnography of the nascent and quickly expanding Nepalese diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area (SFBA) of California with Nepalese immigrants.[ii] The methodology of a dual approach of (digital) ethnography aims to examine the research questions through a focus on wider interactions as portrayed in the digital sphere and personal narratives.

## 1.1 Context of Nepalese Immigration to the US

Nepal's political and economic context is a big determinant for migration towards the US and other destination contexts (Koirala, 2004). Due to conflict and protracted political instability as well as a lack of domestic job prospects, many Nepalese aspire to migrate abroad, both temporarily and

permanently, seeking countries with more economic opportunities, political stability, and stronger welfare systems. Large Nepalese diasporas exist in India, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Malaysia, Portugal, and the US (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024). Consequently, Nepal's economic, political, and social context are transformed due to the exodus of young people and the influx of financial and social remittances (Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung, 2002). Writing about Nepalese migration to Malta, Neubauer (2024) argued for the importance of examining geographical imaginaries and migration aspirations in the migratory process of young Nepalese people. Exposure to the world via the internet, social links with others who have migrated already, and social and cultural pressures around migration as a rite of passage shape the ultimate decision to move to a destination (Neubauer, 2024).

Though the Middle East and East Asian countries are the primary destination for Nepalese migrants, Western destinations remain key places for Nepalese migration imaginaries and aspirations (Neubauer, 2024). Particularly the US as a *Thulo Desh, (*big/important country) or *Karmabhumi (*land of work) has loomed large in the consciousness of the Nepalese public since the Cold War (Tamot, 2008). In Nepal, migration abroad is deeply linked with notions of progress, success, idealism and development (Thornton et al. 2022). Between 2000 to 2022, at least 167,000[iii] Nepalese have immigrated to the US. Tamot (2008, p. 305) describes that the US has an "aura of opportunity in the psyche of middle-class Nepalis." In fact, the Nepalese diaspora in the US is the largest one after India (Adhikari, 2022). Prior to the 1990s, only some 4,778 Nepalese were officially recorded in US immigration statistics. These immigrants were from a privileged, urban, upper-class, and highly educated segment of the Nepalese population (Thapa Oli and Yang, 2024). Between 2000-2022, some 14.4% of permanently settled immigrants are accounted for through direct employer-sponsorship (14.4%), mostly concentrated in 'highly-skilled' occupations (Thapa Oli and Yang, 2024). However, with the introduction of the Diversity Visa lottery system in the 1990s, which sought to increase immigration to the US for under-represented countries, Nepalese immigration to the US surged, particularly bringing in more rural and middle and lower-class people with less years of formal education (Dhungel, 1999; Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024). Of the Nepalese immigrants who settled with permanent residency between 2000-2022, Diversity Visa recipients accounted for 27.6% as they are fast tracked to receiving permanent residency status (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024). As more Nepalese people permanently settle in the US and sponsor their family, relatives, and friends to migrate, the diaspora continues to increase rapidly, particularly in the SFBA, with family sponsored and dependents of US citizens accounting for another 27.6% of permanently settled Nepalese immigrants (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024).

Another important group of Nepalese in the US are international students, though not technically counted as immigrants due to their temporary status.The official count of Nepalese students in the US have increased steadily since the mid 1990s from 1,219 students (1995/1996) to 15,090 students (2022/2023) (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024). Particularly as most international students settle in the US upon graduation, this research project also includes the perspectives of current and previous students residing in the US and considers them immigrants as well (Tamot, 2008). There are also many Nepalese who remain undocumented living in the US, having overstayed tourist or student visas and navigating legal precarity along with economic and social precarity, according to interviews with immigration lawyers in the SFBA.

In addition to this, Nepalese people have increasingly been arriving in the US through the southern Mexican border, according to several interviews with Nepalese immigrants, social workers, and immigration lawyers. Migrants travel to Latin America and undertake several month-long harrowing journeys migrating north through Central America. Following these high-risk and expensive journeys, immigrants file for asylum upon arrival at the US. People already residing in the US may also

claim for asylum after a previous visa category has expired. In fact, the largest category of Nepalese immigrants who have received permanent residency were refugees/asylees (31.2%) who sought protection from the US due to fear of persecution in Nepal (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024).

Having arrived in the US, many Nepalese have settled in the SFBA, either as their first destination or upon living in other states before. According to community leaders, this area is deemed one of the metropolitan areas with the most Nepalese in the US. Since 2010, immigration from Nepal has been the fastest growing group in terms of percent change within the Asian immigrant population of California, nearly doubling that of the next fastest growing Asian immigrant population (Sumida, 2023). More than double the percent change of nearby counties in the SFBA, is the 545% increase of Nepalese immigrants in Contra Costa County in the East Bay of between 2010 and 2020 (Sumida, 2024). Contra Costa County thereby forms the main site for my fieldwork along with select areas of the SFBA. A simple Google search or drive through this county reveals this new immigrant group's presence, through Nepalese-run restaurants, grocery stores, and businesses. The growing Nepalese diaspora in the SFBA, like many diasporas in global metropoles, has also organized into various informal associations and organizations for various cultural and social purposes. This emergent diaspora is increasingly making a space for themselves in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

## 1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

Examining the nascent Nepalese diaspora in the SFBA of the US offers a relevant case study due to the rapid increase in immigration and growth in diaspora organizations and digital social groups which have emerged in the past years. Due to the relatively recent and rapidly increasing arrival of many Nepalese in this region of the world, this project aims to identify what kinds of precarity, and challenges are confronted upon arrival in the US, particularly paying attention to the different kinds of immigrants coming from Nepal. Drawing on the literature presented in this paper about migrant networks and informal social protection, this project aims to understand how co-ethnic social networks are leveraged by Nepalese immigrants in the SFBA to secure social protection as they establish themselves in the destination context whilst facing precarity and challenges in this process.

By centering the individual and interpersonal experiences of Nepalese immigrants in the process of building up their lives in the US, my aim is to highlight migrant agency at the migration-development nexus. Thereby my overarching research objectives include gathering insights into the lives of Nepalese immigrants arrived since 2000s, understanding the existing barriers that Nepalese immigrants in the SFBA faced and mapping out how Nepalese immigrants provide informal social protection to each other as well as where the limits of such social support are. To not essentialize or assume a preconfigured Nepalese identity, one of my research objectives is to highlight the intersectional identities of interlocutors and research participants.

My main research question is: *What role do diasporic social networks play for the lives of Nepalese immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly to address precarity and secure informal social protection?*

Sub-questions include:
- What kinds of precarity and barriers do Nepalese immigrants face upon arriving in the US?
- What role may (digital) diasporic networks play for Nepalese immigrants' securing of social protection?
- How do intersectional systems of power affect the social networks formed and used?

My hope is that the research findings are of use to Nepalese immigrant community leaders in the SFBA and to the increasingly expanding Nepalese communities worldwide. The research findings may also be of interest to migration and social policy researchers who focus on the experiences of new immigrants and the role of social networks in navigating a new context, accessing information, and securing social protection.

## 1.3 Overview of the Study

The paper is structured as following. Firstly, in Chapter 2, I will present the relevant literature on informal social protection, social capital, and migrant networks, paying attention to relevant examples and tensions in the literature. Following this, in Chapter 3, I describe my methodological approach of a (digital) ethnography. After this, I present my findings in four chapters. Chapter 4 examines the role of diasporic social networks in creating an arrival infrastructure for Nepalese immigrants, with attention paid to kinship, friendship, diasporic, and digital social networks. Chapter 5 describes the different forms of precarity narrated by my research participants, with respect to social, legal, and financial precarities. The complex role of social networks in reducing yet also potentially exacerbating precarity is also examined in this section. Chapter 6 examines the digital realm of Facebook as a space for informal social protection to occur in a wider co-ethnic social network through weak ties. Chapter 7 portrays the role of diaspora organizations in providing social protection to immigrants and promoting socialization and forming social capital, while drawing out the complexities of exclusion from and power dynamics within diaspora organizations. This section also questions the reliance on social networks as a strategy for social support within the community and examines the role of state-provided services.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section examines the existing conceptual and empirical literature on migrant networks and social protection. Firstly, the literature about migrants' access to social protection is reviewed, with a following section exploring the conceptual definitions of social capital and social networks, including their positive and negative dynamics. Then, I turn to the literature on migrant networks, particularly dynamics between veteran and newcomer immigrants, aspects of inclusion and exclusion, and the role of migrant networks in providing social support to immigrants. Lastly, I examine the role of co-ethnic social networks in labor market outcomes.

## 2.1 Immigrants' Access to Social Protection

Researchers have differentially conceptualized social protection, though the overarching aim at risk reduction and providing a social safety net prevail (Mumtaz, 2022). Social protection is defined as a set of public or private measures to reduce the vulnerabilities communities face as a result of poverty, inequality, or social exclusion (Barrientos and Hulme, 2016; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Norton, Conway and Foster, 2002). Formal and informal domains have been written about by separating resources derived from the state and market with families, social networks, and individuals. In contexts of extreme poverty, structural barriers to accessing formal social protection, or in insecure welfare regimes, informal social protection becomes the norm to share information, resources, and access to formally provided social services (Devereux and Getu, 2013; Wood and Gough, 2006). Informal social protection based on social networks may complement or undermine formal social protection schemes (Calder and Tanhchareun, 2014). Particularly, kinship and friendship networks create a social safety net from poverty through informal assistance in the form of cash transfers,

consumption smoothing, and care work (De Vos et al., 2004; Foster, 2000; Phillips, 2002 as cited in Mumtaz, 2022). The literature also points to NGOs, religious associations, voluntary associations, burial societies, neighborhoods, village communities, credit societies, and kin-based support systems and friends as a source of informal insurance (Serra Mingot and Mazzucato, 2017) as a well as cash remittances as a source of risk management to exogenous disasters or income shocks (Agarwal & Horowitz, 2002; Angelucci et al., 2018). However, an issue with informal social protection remains the exclusionary nature for certain groups of people with less resources to access the social networks necessary (Offer, 2012), and power asymmetries within networks (Delpy, 2024). Scholars have also argued that social networks can lead to patronage and social control (Calder and Tanhchareun, 2014; King, 2017). These dependent support relationships place people into vulnerable positions, particularly if they already also lack comprehensive access to formal social protection (Wood and Gough, 2006).

There is an abundance of research on migrants' access to social protection in host countries. Avato, Koettl and Sabates-Wheeler (2010) defined social protection for migrants along four dimensions, including access to social services and security through formal means via the state, portability of social security across borders, labor market conditions for migrants, and access to (transnational) informal networks for social support. This paper engages particularly with the latter two aspects of social protection. With respect to migrants' access to formal social protection, studies have documented that access to welfare is distributed unevenly, particularly along lines of citizenship and due to structural barriers (Holzmann and Koettl 2011; Serra Mingot and Mazzucato, 2017). Locke, Seeley and Rao (2013, p.1885) describe this phenomenon as stemming from the "'secondary' citizenship" of migrants due to methodological nationalism in social policy design. In the absence of access to reliable formal measures, "de facto social protection for migrants and their families involves [...] building strong informal mechanisms of social protection, including those rooted in strong family relations." Indeed, as Avato, Koettl and Sabates-Wheeler (2010) outline in their definition of social protection for migrants, the literature on migration and social protection also points to the importance of semi-formal and informal providers of social protection for migrants (Levitt et al., 2023; Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003).

## 2.2 Social Capital and Social Networks

Before discussing migrant networks as a source of social protection, it is important to clarify the concepts used in this research. Examining informal social protection broadly, including outside the migration context, much academic attention has focused on the concepts of social networks, social support, and social capital. Based on a synthesis of literature on informal social protection, Mumtaz (2022) writes about informal networks of social support and conceptualizes informal social protection along three dimensions as the combination of informal assistance (cash or material support for consumption and immediate security needs), informal labor market measures (vocational training, specialized education, etc. to develop human capital), and informal insurance (risk pooling and contributions to risk management for income and exogenous shocks) with a diverse range of sources such as family, NGOs, religious institutions, and local communities. In the same vein, writing about the drawbacks of informal social protection without the support of formal social protection, Calder and Tanhchareun (2014) conceptualize informal social protection as acts of care and sharing between kin and friends, informal cooperation aimed at livelihood and risk pooling, and solidarity events for life-transitions and crises.

The boundaries between scholarship on social support and informal social protection are not clear and heavily overlap. However, social support may be understood to focus more on the needs of

people versus social protection more on risk pooling and minimizing. For example, Vonneilich (2022, p.25) described social support in three dimensions as emotional, instrumental (practical support such as loans or childcare), and informational, that is "services that provide knowledge for solving specific problems or knowledge about access to specific resources." By contrast, though social protection draws on social support, protection relates to the minimizing and protection from specific risks and precarious conditions.

As mentioned earlier, the literature on social support and informal social protection draws on concepts of social networks and social capital [iv] (Vonneilich, 2022). Scholars of social capital have commonly conceptualized social capital as a tool for cooperation and social support. The scholarship comes to a consensus around the nature of social capital being accessible "by virtue of [...] membership in networks or broader social structures." (Portes, 1995, p.12). As cited in Wilson (1998), Coleman (1988, p. 166) argued that social capital is "the process by which established human relations -such as those rooted in ethnic communities- act as resources for economic cooperation." However, social capital can also refer to accessing information and cooperation beyond financial or economic needs, extending also to social support (Vonneleich, 2022). Linking social capital explicitly to immigrant networks based on research with Mexican immigrants in the US, Massey et al. (1987) argue that social capital in the form of access to information, employment, housing, and financial support increases as migrant networks increase. Examining the 'sources' of social capital, Portes (1998) differentiates between altruistic and instrumental sources of social capital based on 'bounded solidarity' and trust-based reciprocity, respectively. For example, in her research with undocumented Nepalese migrant workers in Japan, Yamanaka (2007) argued that a bounded solidarity emerged amongst the labor migrants due to a shared identity around ethnicity, class, and legal status as well as labor market conditions as the source of exploitation, thereby providing an incentive to engage in collective action and collaboration such as exchanging information on jobs and housing.

Importantly, scholarship on social capital and social networks differentiates between strong and weak social relations. Essential are the conceptual differences between strong intra-community ties through bonding capital and bridging capital within acquaintance networks as weaker ties across communities and locations (Putnam, 2000). Granovetter (1973) also defined an argument about the 'strength of weak ties' within social networks, particularly about the role of information and resource sharing across wider networks of lower frequency and less intense social relations. Research has also examined the adverse impacts of strong ties and has found that bonding social capital can have adverse impacts on social control within co-ethnic immigrant communities, particularly manifesting for immigrant women and second-generation immigrant youth (Evergeti and Zontini, 2006; Portes and Landolt, 2000; Zontini, 2006). However, scholars have also argued that the dichotomy between bridging and bonding capital is too simplistic, instead advocating for more nuanced views of power and social location of individuals and their differential access to social capital within social networks (Bucholtz, 2018).

In the same vein, social networks are not devoid of power dynamics, rather power asymmetries can lead to a lack of reciprocity in sharing resources in social networks (Delpy, 2024; Di Falco and Bulte, 2011). Calder and Tanhchareun (2014, p. 6) state that "social networks already support those seen as deserving based on local notions of fairness and justice." The literature on social networks and capital are also clear that social capital is not equally accessible to all members of a social network due to power dynamics and culturally and socially mediated norms of deservingness (Ryan, 2011). For example, Ryan (2011), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital and Granovetter's weak ties conceptualization for research with Polish immigrants in London, argues that ethnicity alone does not account for the construction of bonding capital but rather that socio-economic status and educational, cultural, and linguistic capital played major roles in the construction of social networks for migrants.

## 2.3 Migrant Networks for Social Support

It is well documented that migrant networks are essential for drawing social support. Migrant networks are "social ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin" (Massey et al., 1993 as cited by Sha (2021, p.3). Drawing on Massey's work on migrant networks and Portes' work on social capital and examining the social networks of undocumented Mozambican migrants in South Africa, Muanamoha, Maharaj and Preston-Whyte (2010, p. 887) conceptualized social networks "as transcend[ing] place, location and territory, and can be considered as spatial conveyors of social capital." As cited in Sha (2021,p.5), Massey (1993) and (1998) describes migrant networks as a "location-specific social capital upon which people can draw to gain access to information and resources elsewhere." As Avato, Koettl and Sabates-Wheeler (2010) argued, migrant networks constitute an important component of migrants' access to social protection. Networks built by migrants can be leveraged for sharing information, accessing, and securing social goods and services such as housing, employment, healthcare, and finance, particularly in settings where the accessing of such goods is limited by the welfare regime, market, or other barriers (Bilecen and Barglowski, 2015; Martín-Díaz and Castellani, 2022; Serra Mingot and Mazzucato, 2016; Yamanaka, 2007). Sha (2021) argues that migrant networks are essential along three dimensions: influencing migrant decision-making, providing information and financial assistance, and supporting permanent settlement (Sha, 2021). Beyond the material, researchers have found that social support within immigrant communities can form an informal social safety net to promote an emotional sense of belonging (Bilecen and Lubbers, 2021; Bilecen and Sienkiewicz, 2015).

### 2.3.1 Online Social Networks

The literature also demonstrates the importance of online social networks for the development of social capital along with in-person activities for closer relations (Lee and Lee, 2010). With the rise of social media platforms, migrant networks and the migratory and arrival process have been transformed. Dekker and Engbersen (2012) argued that social media have facilitated the strengthening of close ties between kin and friends, the expansion of weak ties to assist in the settling process of migrants, the creation of digital arrival infrastructures, and democratized access to insider information about the migration and adaptation process. Research has found that online social networking can help initiate new contacts for migrants upon arrival in their destination context, secure social support and information related to their settlement and adaptation, and maintain existing close ties (Bucholtz, 2018; Dekker and Engbersen, 2012; Hiller and Franz, 2004). Furthermore, research has also demonstrated the important role of information communication technologies (ICTs) in transnational social networks, particularly with respect to the transnational lives of (im)migrants regarding care work, social support, maintenance of social relations, etc. For example, Brinkerhoff (2009) writes about digital diasporic networks as "cyber grassroots organizations" engaged in the creation and performance of hybrid diasporic identities which facilitate simultaneous transnational engagement and adaptation to the host community via information channels. Online social contacts have not replaced the need for real-life contacts and interactions with veteran migrants but have complemented these with further routes for navigating arrival in a new destination (Hsiao and Dillahunt, 2018). However, it is unclear to what degree the ties sustained digitally translate to social support in real life (Martin Diaz and Castellani, 2022). Furthermore, the literature discussed above about online migrant social networks has been written mostly from a social capital and social network perspective with a lesser focus on how access to online social networks can influence migrants' access to social protection.

### 2.3.2 Networks as Infrastructures

Indeed, there is consensus in the literature that migrant social networks form an important social infrastructure for the reception of immigrants in their destination context (Bashi, 2007; Boyd, 1989; Hernandez-Leon, 2013; Lopez-Sala and Godenau, 2019; Massey et al., 1987; Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019). For example, examining migratory flows from Mexico to the US, Massey and Espana (1987, p.736) stated: "networks provide a social infrastructure capable of supporting international migration on a mass basis." Massey and Espana (1987, p. 736) argued that a growing diaspora provides a "secure and stable environment within which new migrants arrive and adapt." Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur (2019, p.11) conceptualize these 'secure and stable environments' in conjunction with social networks of support as 'arrival infrastructures' as "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced." Arrival infrastructures understood as such may be found in hair salons, libraries, restaurants, shops, or religious sites run by migrants in which newcomer and veteran immigrants mingle and exchange information and support as new social networks are formed (Wessendorf and Gembus, 2024). Wessendorf and Gembus (2024) also argue that beyond the presence and visibility of such infrastructures in the form of physical spaces, the 'social front door', referring to key individuals who connect migrants with these infrastructures, is of vital importance. Such an environment with voluntary associations, cultural centers, and events can serve as an "ethnic infrastructure" essential in immigrant identity formation in the words of Tamot (2008, p.249) who examined the transnational lives of Nepalese graduate students in the US.

### 2.3.3. Newcomer-Veteran Immigrant Interactions

Thereby, much of the literature on migrant networks and arrival infrastructures focuses on the interpersonal relations between veteran and newcomer co-ethnic immigrants as essential to the migratory and settling process (Massey, 1987). For example, in her ethnographic research with West Indian Caribbean migrant social networks in New York City and London, Bashi (2007, p.24) developed the hub-and-spoke wheel model, arguing that veteran immigrants serve as the 'hubs' or migration brokers, while socially 'sponsoring' newcomer immigrants who serve as 'spokes' by finding them jobs and housing in a "culture of reciprocity." Similarly, drawing on Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh's (2012) 'migrant brokers,' Hanhörster and Wessendorf (2020, p.4) coin the term 'arrival broker' referring to individuals who are instrumental to the process of newcomer's arrival and access to material and symbolic resources. Indeed, Massey (1987) found that newcomer Mexican immigrants in the US have a wider array of social connections available to them than earlier migrants, particularly due to the established social clubs and associations formed over the years by veteran immigrants. The relationship between veteran and newcomer migrants as well as with other people living in the destination context may change over time and space and based on differing needs of migrants as well as their socio-economic and geographic mobility changes (Boyd, 1989; Bucholtz, 2018; Ryan, 2011). Veteran immigrants may exploit newcomer immigrants, particularly those with a precarious or temporary legal status, as has been documented significantly (Boyd 1989; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Sha, 2021; Zell and Skop, 2011). That is, such power differentials can lead to the development of dependent-clientelist relations within social networks, as research has found relatives to also exploit each other and migrants with legal status to exploit newcomers or those without documents for personal profit (Tilly, 1990).

### 2.3.4 Social Networks and Labor Market Access

The literature on migrant networks is also greatly centered on how social networks help immigrants access the labor market through job referrals and access to jobs within immigrant-run businesses. As defined by Avato, Koettl, and Sabates-Wheeler (2010), an essential component of social protection for migrants is the labor market conditions they face. That is, financial support and labor market inclusion are an important dimension of social protection and care (Bilecen et al., 2019). Studies have found that strong endogenous social networks increase employment for (im)migrants and forms an insurance-like safety net in periods of unemployment (Gemkow and Neugart, 2011). In a study of immigrant labor markets in Los Angeles, California, Waldinger and Lichter (2003) argued that social networks help enforce social contracts and obligations, give people influence, and easily share labor market information within an 'ethnically homogeneous' social network. Scholars have used the term 'ethnic enclave' to describe the phenomena of spatially clustered immigrant communities and have argued that these enclaves are essential for the support of newcomer immigrants in accessing employment, working in a familiar cultural environment, and gaining contacts with co-ethnics as well as providing a labor force for veteran immigrants with businesses (Light, 2002; Massey et.al 1987 as cited in Sha, 2021, and Portes, 1998). Ethnic enclaves can also form a social infrastructure of care for immigrants with childcare responsibilities through their employment in small family run businesses through which people secure childcare (Boyd 1989, Sha, 2021).

Though research has found that migrant networks are essential for accessing social support, much has also been written about the negative aspects of bonding social capital, drawing on the work of Portes, as well as the ambiguities between social support and exploitation as well as altruism and self-interest within migrant social networks. For example, literature has also found that such referral hiring within immigrant social networks can also increase labor market segmentation, by keeping (im)migrants in certain low-wage industries and reducing their economic mobility (Meyer and Vasey, 2020). Research has also found that strong ethnic social networks can lead to isolation and segregation from other communities (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Somerville, 2015) as well as less information available from non-co-ethnics (Portes, 1998; Ryan 2011).

Furthermore, though it is established that social networks are important for immigrants in securing financial support and labor market inclusion, the scholarship seems to be divided as to the efficacy of weak ties versus close ties in sharing information about job vacancies. Traditionally, the scholarship argued that weak ties are essential in delivering information within a social network (Granovetter, 1973). However, some scholarship has cast doubt at the efficacy of migrant networks in sharing job vacancies widely across 'weak ties' rather than privileging closer connections through family and friendships due to labor market competitiveness (De Haas, 2010; Wissinka, Düvell, Mazzucato, 2020). Thereby, the literature both underscores the importance of social networks for immigrants' access to the labor market and thereby to an income, whilst highlighting the effects on labor market segmentation particularly in the secondary labor market or in low-paying jobs.

### 2.3.5 Limitations to Networks: Exclusions

Scholars have also critiqued older literature which assumed migrants' 'embeddedness' in migrant networks without much regard for intersectional identities or examination of contextual political, legal, and economic factors (Pathirage and Collyer, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Schapendonk, 2015, Sha, 2021). The literature on migrant networks reveals that selective exclusions from migrant social networks reproduce existing social and economic hierarchies (Cederberg, 2012; De Haas, 2010). Bourdieu's description of social capital based on an understanding of power and exclusion plays an important role in this stream of literature (Ryan, 2011). Putnam (2000) also acknowledged that while people may

have strong bonding capital due to a factor such as ethnicity, that solidarity may not extend to other differentiating factors such as socio-economic status (Ryan, 2011). Dahinden (2013) discusses these as 'network boundaries' which are reinforced by symbolic boundaries and are translated into real-life social boundaries which exclude or include certain immigrants based on notions of deservingness, for example linked to their education, establishment, and residential status. One such important network boundary for accessibility of migrant networks rests on the legal capital of immigrants (Collyer, 2005; Kaşlı, 2016; Staring, 2000 as cited in Collyer, 2005). For example, Collyer (2005) argues that undocumented migrants are excluded from pre-existing co-ethnic migrant networks, particularly also from social support from kin and family, due to the burden of an undocumented status. This kind of 'representational gap' to cite Nicholls (2013) between newcomers who most need access to social networks and support in the destination context and the elite who are involved in organizations creates intra-group power dynamics as documented by Kaşlı (2016) in the context of Bulgarian migrant associations in Turkey. With newer migrants' economic and legal precarity translating to a lack of agency and decision-making capacity in migrant associations, Kaşlı (2016) demonstrated the skew in interest in migrant associations towards the elites in the communities and the logic of 'ethnic deservingness' imposed in the operation and membership of migrant associations. Though it is established that power dynamics within migrant associations affect the membership and decision-making of the organization, there is less clarity in the literature on whether such a representational gap in community leadership also necessarily affects the social support and protection provisioning that newcomers and immigrants seek out whilst in precarious positions.

To summarize, the literature on migrant networks and informal social protection demonstrates the ambivalences prevalent due to exclusion, differential accessibility, decision-making capacity, and clientelism, particularly between newcomers and more established immigrants. That is, beyond solidarity and instrumental reciprocity mobilized to offer social support and protection to members within co-ethnic networks, exploitation and dependent relations are also common within migrant networks. Another tension in the literature is the role of strong kinship and friendship ties (bonding capital) as opposed to 'weaker' lower frequency ties (bridging capital) in the process of securing social protection, particularly related to how migrants draw upon different kinds of social networks in their process of migrating and adapting to life in the destination context. Furthermore, the literature reveals a stream of literature embracing how various markers of identity, privilege, and positionality differentially position people within social networks and thereby also influence access to social support and capital. Lastly, with respect to securing social protection within a co-ethnic network and associations, there remains a gap linking the experiences of individual migrants in their personal social networks, wider diasporic social networks, and associations as these are usually addressed separately in the literature. Thereby, this study examines all these different kinds of social networks together in the narratives of immigrants as important elements to the migration and adaptation process, particularly with respect to securing the social protection necessary to live a flourishing and secure life.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

This research project takes an ethnographic approach, both virtually and on-site over the course of one and a half months (July-August 2024) in various sites within the SFBA. The ethnographic approach allowed for an exploratory approach, allowing for me to flexibly follow leads as they emerged in informal discussions and participant-observations of community gatherings and Facebook posts.

## 3.1 On-Site Ethnography

I participated in informal discussions at events and gatherings of the Nepalese diaspora over the course of several weeks from mid-July to mid-August, 2024 with participant observation in events, and gatherings across varying degrees of formality. Interactions with people in these spaces allowed me to build rapport with interlocutors and interviewees as well as have informal discussions about the role of social networks for Nepalese immigrants' setting up their lives in the US and the securing of employment and housing. The on-site ethnography at a variety of sites and events allowed me to interact with a wide range of Nepalese immigrants who are differentially positioned along the intersections of time of arrival, socio-economic status, ethnicity and caste, gender, and legal status. This is essential for my research which seeks to understand the Nepalese diaspora in the SFBA not as an essentialized monolith but rather as a group of people situated at different intersections of structural disadvantage or privilege. Based on my observations and insights through interaction with people, I maintained a field journal with detailed notes.

## 3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews guided by specific questions and thematic topics formed the bulk of my insights into this research project. These interviews were exploratory to understand how Nepalese immigrants in the SFBA narrate their personal experience of receiving or giving social assistance through diasporic social networks in the process of settling in the US. Interviewees were recruited through a purposive sampling method based on existing relationships, rapport established at diasporic gatherings, Facebook group posts, or referrals from previous interviewees. To reduce interviewee selection bias based on my own network, snowball sampling through previous interviewees helped diversify the sample. This process also ensured a balance of gender and caste/ethnicity in selecting interviewees to ensure the study does not reproduce any sole, specific narrative or experience. I arranged meetings to be in-person at park benches and picnic tables, coffee shops, beauty parlors, and Nepalese restaurants. Most of the interviews, however, took place over the phone through the Messenger app due to convenience for the interviewees.

Interviews took place primarily in Nepalese but also in English, often featuring a blended mix of the two languages. This helped for interviewees and me as the researcher to articulate issues and experiences that span the transnational experience of being Nepalese in America. Voluntary informed consent was obtained both through written and oral means based on the preference of interviewees. Ranging from 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours and with the help of a thematic guide and adapted questions, the interviews included wide-ranging topics, including discussing background and demographic information, life prior to migration to the US, the reasons for migrating, the process of finding jobs and housing upon arrival in the US, challenges or precarity faced upon moving to the US, participation in diaspora organizations, accessing of social services, reflections on the role of the existing social networks, the process of creating new social networks, and further reflections on the Nepalese immigrant community in the SFBA.

For the analysis, all interviews were translated and transcribed to English, firstly through a secure online automated transcription service and then again manually through detailed manual revision to ensure there was little to no meaning lost in context. Interviews were then inductively coded after in the Atlas.ti software for thematic occurrences and connections in an iterative process. Drawing from this, thematic patterns and vignettes are gathered across interviews and linked with thematic findings from the digital ethnography component.

## 3.3 Digital Ethnography

In addition to in-person interactions at gatherings and individual interviews, I engaged in a digital ethnography to observe how diasporic networks extend to the digital realm via Facebook groups. Following the approach of Martin Diaz and Castellani (2022), I opted to use Facebook as a social forum and publicly oriented app over direct messaging apps. I also selected Facebook due to the high volume of users from the Nepalese community using this application and the abundance of public and private groups across the SFBA. The wide variety of diaspora networks and associations in Facebook groups are useful to understand the different kinds of social networks and self-help groups formed by migrants. Digital ethnography enriches on-site ethnography by allowing me to access an extensive "online archive of social reality" (Dalsgaard, 2016, p.105). By combining the digital and real life as social fields, I aimed to draw out what these networks, associations, groups, and interactions in the digital spaces mean for people's lives in the securing of jobs and housing upon arrival in the SFBA. In the words of Martín-Díaz and Castellani (2022, p.5), "interaction fields were defined based on the online and offline experiences of the actors themselves, not as dissociated realities but as interconnected spaces and temporalities." Understanding digital spaces in such a manner allows the researcher to study offline and online relations as a continuum and mutually constitutive, though also representing different kinds of social networks and relations (Hine, 2011; Daalsgard, 2016).

After being referred to the most popularly used (at least amongst my interviewees) Facebook group, I took field notes on the kinds of posts made in the Facebook group, limiting the expansive "desk-field" in the words of Goralska (2020) to posts made during my fieldwork period of July-August 2024. . Initially, I sifted through the digital group's posts by looking at the 'most-relevant' posts to find posts with the most likes and comments, signaling community engagement with the post. I also took notes on the kinds of comments made under certain posts and examined the 'featured' posts saved by the group administrator. To complement this practice, I also interviewed the administrator of the group and another popular rival Facebook group for the Nepalese diaspora in the SFBA. Explicit consent to include these groups in the research has been obtained in order to avoid a covert ethnographic approach via a public post and message to the administrators of the Facebook group (Hine, 2011). For privacy and ethical purposes, the name of this Facebook group will not be used in this paper.

## 3.4 Positionality: Who am I?

I am simultaneously an insider and outsider to the (digital) field(s) which I entered for this project, both through my personal background and my dual status as community-member and student researcher. Due to my own family, in particular the social ties my mother has created and maintained since her migration from Nepal to the US, I was raised (partially) embedded in the Nepalese diaspora of the SFBA. This experience and connection helped me recruit participants and gave me the necessary cultural tools to build rapport. Whilst I am connected in certain social networks within the Nepalese community in the US, my positionality as a student researcher at a European university inevitably distances me from the people I connected with and portrayed in my research paper. Though my research participants and I share a transnational identity with Nepal in some sense, our life trajectories are undeniably very different. That is my status as a US citizen, white-passing appearance, financially privileged background and access to higher education structurally distances me from (im)migrants who face discrimination and are positioned in precarious socio-economic and legal configurations.

Furthermore, my interest in migration, diaspora, and social protection undoubtedly emerges from my own life experiences of being raised in the South Asian diaspora community in the US and

experiences of temporarily living in rural Sindhupalchok, Nepal amongst people who have or are in the process of migrating abroad for employment (von Rospatt, 2024). My background and being an international student in the Netherlands are also key aspects of my identity which have informed my interest in transnational mobility, cultural hybridity, and placemaking as an act of belonging; these thus far have defined my own life and the lens through which I see the world (von Rospatt, 2024).

These elements of my personal positionality and the adjoined limitations are essential to my motivation for embarking on this project. My goal is not to make a generalizable claim about the lives of immigrants in their process of securing social protection through social networks, but rather to portray a rich case study of varied Nepalese diasporic experiences with social networks and social protection in the context of the SFBA.

## 3.5 Reflection on Ethics

This project required active reflexivity about my fieldwork journey and interview process. I was concerned with how fieldwork and interviews positioned me in relation to my interviewees. I hoped for these moments to become opportunities to build relationships with people that reduce the extractive or one-dimensional nature of interviews (Salim, 2024). Inspired by Dr. Rosalba Icaza Garcia and decolonial research methods, I aimed to engage in 'radical listening' in the process of encountering people positioned differently along structures of privilege and coloniality (Aguilar and Icaza, 2021; Cairo et al., 2024). I also ensured that people know they can opt out of interviewees at any point or skip over topics if they do not wish to disclose certain information. Prior to the interviews, I provided an informed consent form to the interviewees which elaborated on this research project and its purposes as well as how the data is managed.

In terms of the digital ethnographic component with regards to "lurking" in semi-public/private spaces is a matter of academic debate, particularly with regards to what information posted online is available (Dalsgaard, 2016; Goralska, 2020; Hine, 2011; Martin Diaz and Castellani, 2022). A rule of thumb I used from Hine (2011)'s guidebook on virtual ethnography is that a researcher should behave with the information as if it were occurring in real life. I recognize how this poses an ethical challenge to me; I thereby intended to ensure an "ethnographic sensitivity", in the words of Hine (2011), to keep ethical issues at the forefront of my observations and use of information in the digital space. Also, any information I use from the digital ethnography for my research is anonymized to protect people's privacy. For a practical matter such as data management, I stored my notes, recordings, and transcripts securely in the Microsoft OneDrive cloud. In the process of writing up the research, I used pseudonyms in my research paper.

# Chapter 4: Arrival Infrastructures: Arriving in the United States

This results section examines the (pre)arrival infrastructures of immigrant social networks which sustain the pull of the American dream and support the migration trajectories of Nepalese immigrants.[v] The existing Nepalese diaspora in the US and the increasing networks of friends, relatives, and acquaintances play a defining role in creating arrival infrastructures which absorb newcomers.

## 4.1 American Dream and "Bidesh Jane, Bidesh Jane"

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I encountered a range of Nepalese immigrants who have arrived under different conditions, yet many were motivated to immigrate for the same reasons. Interviewees all spoke of structural factors such as political instability, caste-based discrimination, the lack of employment prospects, and endemic corruption in Nepal as playing a key role in motivating emigration. Most predominant, however, in my interactions and interviews with Nepalese immigrants was the pull of the American dream.

This narrative as sustained by the word-of-mouth nature of migration aspirations underpins the expectations of newcomer immigrants, whether it be students, asylum seekers, family petition applicants, or diversity visa seekers. The case of students was a particularly predominant theme in the fieldwork process. Nearly a third of my interviewees arrived in the US as students, pursuing their undergraduate or graduate degrees upon their own aspirations and particularly those of their parents and community members in Nepal. As Baas (2020) argued in his ethnography with Indian students in Australia, the educational and migration industries become deeply entangled in the aspirations and lives of international students. For example, Kaushal, who immigrated in 2007 and whom I met via Facebook, reflected on this when I asked him why he immigrated to the US. *"There was a trend to leave the country at that time. Bidesh jane, Bidesh jane (go abroad, go abroad). Family and society are saying that everyone else is going to US and Australia, so you have to go there."* Similarly, another interviewee of mine, Akash, told me: *"In Nepal, America is a big dream. Everyone forced me to go to America. I didn't know anything. I was under a lot of pressure. If I wanted to study abroad, I had to go to America."*

Several of the people I met and engaged with shared that they had arrived in the US via the paid services of educational consultancies which helped placements in colleges. Kaushal told me about his experiences of immigrating as an international student himself. At the time he studied in 2015, he knew several friends from who also studied there; he estimated some 90% of the students to be Nepalese, showing how migration is a networked phenomenon (Bashi, 2007; Portes and Bach, 1985). Similarly, Akash, who immigrated as a student in 2015 pursuing a Master's in Business Administration told me that he estimated most of his classmates at a college in Oakland to be Nepalese. *"I applied via a consultancy. All my friends studied there; they all said the same. They told me that I should try Lincoln. It was mostly immigrants and Nepalis."* Akash spoke about the emotional social support he found amongst his Nepalese classmates, many of whom remain his close friends after nearly a decade of living in the SFBA. This links with Tamot's (2008, p.273) argument that Nepalese voluntary associations, cultural programs, and online support communities create "ethnic infrastructures" which enable the cultivation of a distinct cultural identity whilst adapting to the US.

## 4.2 "That Brother Made it Easier For Us": Kinship and Friendship Networks as (Pre) Arrival Infrastructure

As expected, my interlocutors spoke of friends and family who already lived in the US as one of the motivations for moving there. Particularly, as Nepalese immigrants increasingly sponsor family members through family petitions, kinship ties are also an essential form of social support for newcomer immigrants. Also, beyond those individuals who immigrated to the US via family sponsorship, my conversations with people revealed relatives and friends often served as the first point of contact for people, providing housing and connecting people to job opportunities. Furthermore, I found that my interviewees narrated their moves within the US through the lens of family and friends who they know live in specific places. Nearly half of my interviewees had lived in other states of the US before moving to the SFBA in California, mostly moving due to kinship and friendship ties.

For example, Sujata, who arrived in the US on a Diversity Visa via her husband and currently runs a beauty parlor and a Nepalese grocery store with her husband, narrated to me how she moved across several states in the US based on existing relationships with acquaintances. Eventually, Sujata and her family were invited by a known distant relative of hers to California where he owned several salons and apartments. The uncle became the first point of contact for Sujata as he gave her a part-time job threading eyebrows at one of his salons, helped arrange housing for her and the family, and introduced her to a wider diaspora emerging in the SFBA. The social capital unlocked through Sujata's kinship ties with a veteran immigrant such as her uncle became an essential asset to her and the family in the process of arriving and setting up life in the US. Through this social connection, Sujata managed to secure emotional, material, and informational support and form a safety net for initial adjustments in a new country. This confirms the vast literature written about the role of kinship ties for immigrants in the securing informal social protection (Mumtaz, 2022).

Interestingly, though close ties were evidently important themes emerging in my discussions and interviews with people, there are also ambivalences attached to these. Currently working as a part-time legal advisor and domestic violence counselor, Anjali explained her ambivalent relationship towards the man who helped provide initial support to her partner and herself: *"So, when we first got here, we got involved in the Nepali community and became acquainted with a Nepali older brother from our same village. And that brother made it easier for us. […]. We stayed with him [in his house] for a while. He took me to a restaurant for me to work. But I only stayed for a week. I didn't like the work; I couldn't tolerate it. I feel now that he was a bit distant and tough. I do appreciate him for his support. The thing is… he knew a lot of information; he had worked and lived here for a long time. And you know… he knew all about me and that I had studied Law [in Nepal] and that I have a Masters. He knew I could do something here utilizing my background. But still, he didn't give me any advice. […] If there had been people in my circle, people who are around us, who would have shared this information, it may have been different."* Anjali's narration not only highlights the importance of close social ties in setting up initially upon arrival, particularly to access information about jobs, but also the importance of quality of job, wage, safety, and alignment with previous background. After years of working in low-wage jobs, she managed to finally get the accreditation to practice law. Anjali's comments that *"if there had been people in my circle"* who would have shared valuable information about career and skills development speaks to the consequences of referral hiring and strong ethnic social networks which can lead to segmentation in the labor market. To this point, Sha (2021, p.10) writes: "engagement in closed networks may actually hold individuals back: not only through lack of valuable social contacts, but also through lack of encouragement and social knowledge disadvantaging individual migrants in the labor market and wider society." This double-edged sword of bonding capital and close social contacts within an ethnically homogenous social network was a relevant and frequent theme and raises questions about the limits of social networks in the securing of social protection, particularly if referral jobs lead to exploitative working conditions.

## 4.3 "I've done this for many people, even people I do not know": Co-ethnic and Diasporic Networks as (Pre) Arrival Infrastructure

In the absence of reliable kinship and friendship networks, diffuse co-ethnic diasporic networks play an essential role in helping immigrants secure information before migration and upon settling. Bahadur, originally from the rural Western Nepalese municipality of Dang, is one such key individual within the Nepalese diasporic network in the SFBA. In 2011, Bahadur migrated to the US by crossing the border through Mexico and Central America. Bahadur told me that *"villages are empty right now in Nepal"* because of the appeal of a secure life and increased income relative to prospects in the Nepalese context. Upon his arrival, he initially lived and worked in Texas and NYC for grueling jobs in a meat

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packaging factory, gas station, and a hotel, before ultimately moving to California where he works at a liquor store and drives Uber in San Francisco. Now a US citizen, Bahadur has sponsored his family to live with him. Bahadur's trajectory illustrates the trajectories of many of my interviewees and interlocutors who moved between precarious jobs and locations based on contacts of people from their hometown and new social connections made with co-ethnics upon arrival. In his free time, Bahadur aims to continue "*social work*" helping newcomers and now volunteers as the chair of a diaspora organization for Western Nepalese immigrants, many of whom cross into the US illegally via the US-Mexico (Sapkota, 2023).

Besides driving for Uber and running his own business, Bahadur, as an established veteran migrant with financial and legal capital as a US citizen, plays an essential role as a migration entrepreneur by supporting newcomer immigrants, particularly those from Western Nepal and who are undocumented. He explained to me that he has helped some 200-250 newcomer immigrants from his region of Nepal to set up their lives, by helping them pay bail from the immigration detention centers, find jobs and housing, and connect people with lawyers to initiate their asylum and legalization process. To borrow the language of Bashi (2007), Bahadur represents a "hub" at which newcomer migrants can anchor themselves to secure guidance and social protection in a new country. Bahadur also opens the "social front door" to a vast diasporic network, which enable immigrants to access further social capital and networks (Wessendorf and Gembus, 2004, p.2). Bahadur shared: *"There is one guy from Lamjung, I won't disclose his name. He wanted to come here from Texas. He didn't have a place to live. He didn't have anyone. He had to come here to file a case for his green card. He was referred to me that I could help me. And he called me and asked me for help. I've never known or heard of this guy and yet we spoke. He said I have some people who are relatives, but I cannot rely on them. And he said that he was hoping I could help him. I helped him secure a flight and find a place for him to stay with me. He came two months later. I fed him and I let him sleep in my house. I helped him find a job. His [asylum] case went through. Now, he lives with his children in San Francisco. I have done this for many people, even people I do not know."*

When I asked Bahadur what motivates him to engage with newcomer immigrants, he shared that *"There are many people like me who help in the Bay Area. Many friends of mine and people from Rukum and Dang they all help. […] We have also come from the same path. We all understand the pain. That is why we believe that no one else should be in pain."* Altruism and an instrumental "culture of reciprocity" underpin the workings of Bahadur's role in helping provide social protection to newcomer immigrants as they arrive in the US (Bashi, 2007, pg.24). The literature is also clear that veteran immigrants engage in sponsoring newcomers "selectively in order to maintain their good reputation in the community," (Bilecen and Lubbers, 2021, p. 844). Bahadur's status as a well-connected veteran immigrant and community leader in his migrant organization is cemented by such actions of goodwill and altruism to sponsor newcomer immigrants. Hernandez Leon (2013, 34) argues that a "rescue industry" emerges to receive refugees and immigrants on the part of co-ethnics, cosmopolitans, and humanitarians. This rescue industry as a social infrastructure straddle both control and facilitation, whilst also blurring the lines between altruistic support and profit gaining ventures by "migration entrepreneurs" (Hernandez-Leon, 2013).

Veteran migration entrepreneurs, such as Bahadur, leverage their knowledge of migratory routes, labor and housing markets, and social connections to become key actors in the migration industry and in the process of helping people adapt to their destination context through a mixed motive of altruism and profit (Hernandez-Leon, 2013). In other words, migrant networks and people such as Bahadur within them reduce the perceived risks of migration and adaptation to the destination context due to "migratory human capital" and commodified solidarity from being in a co-ethnic social network (Hernandez-Leon, 2013, p. 29). As Bahadur's example highlights, co-ethnics form arrival

infrastructures for newcomers and play the role of migration entrepreneurs by facilitating the migration process, providing information, social contacts, material support, and access to the labor market (Wessendorf and Gembus, 2024)

## 4.4 "There Must be a Way": Facebook as Infrastructure for Newcomer Immigrants

In many of my interactions and interviews, the topic of Facebook as an important resource for information for people prior to migration, upon arrival, and after adapting naturally emerged without prompting. Beyond key prominent individuals within diasporic networks, digital social networking plays an important role for immigrants to get information and access the support they need in their migration process (Hess and Petrogiannis, 2020). Nepalese diasporic Facebook groups represent co-ethnic digital social networks which immigrants can tap into to access contacts with people beyond those they have encountered in real-life. One interviewee of mine shared that *"I have felt that I see some of the faces in Facebook groups frequently and it feels that I have already met that person, right? Even though, you know, there was no in-person meeting. So I have felt that several times and that also helped me to make a good network here."* As discussed by Dekker and Engbersen (2012), online social network can be essential for migrants' development of 'acquaintance networks' and weak ties to expand, allowing for greater information and resource exchange. These comments illustrate how the digital and real-life are experienced simultaneously as a continuum (Daalsgard, 2021; Hine, 2011) by people in the process of forming new social connections upon migrating to a new destination, which as previously discussed are essential to the securing of social protection, accessing of essential information, and forming of new social ties (Vonneleich, 2022).)

Most people mentioned the same popular Facebook group[vi] as a key important site, though there are other groups as well in the area and several larger groups aimed at the Nepalese community in the US more broadly. One interviewee of mine, Raj, pointed me towards a national Facebook group of 30,000 members, which serves as a digital forum for both aspiring and settled Nepalese immigrants. Most posts revolve around immigration advice and finding jobs and housing in various metropolitan areas of the US. There are several of these national and local Facebook groups which cater to the wide-ranging interests of the rapidly growing Nepalese diaspora. These digital forums bounded through a diasporic identity provide a (pre) arrival infrastructure by allowing people to access social networks and the social capital needed to secure housing, jobs, and information prior to and upon migrating. For the purposes of this project, I focused on examining the digital world of the most popularly cited local Facebook group as it relates to informal social protection, though surely similar dynamics persist in adjacent groups as well.[vii]

Ratna, whose story I have described earlier, highlighted how she used the group to find housing in California: *"Before, when we were living in Georgia, I checked online for apartments in the Bay Area and it was so expensive, I couldn't believe it. […] But I knew there were many Nepalis and Indians in the Bay Area and so I knew there would be a way that people had problems solved. I knew it would be possible to live there; there must be a way. […] We knew we had friends we could rely on in the Bay Area but we also wanted to be independent and so we knew we could find our own way. […] A friend told me about the Facebook group, and she told me I can find affordable rooms available there."* This excerpt illuminates the importance of the social infrastructure of the Facebook group to newcomer immigrants. Her recognition that "*there must be a way*" to live affordably in the SFBA is linked to the recognition of a large presence of Nepalese and Indians as part of a larger South Asian diaspora. Ratna's comments highlight again that ethnic ties and a diasporic identity are essential assets that can be leveraged for the purpose of securing an affordable life upon

arrival in the SFBA. Connecting this with the literature on social support as informal social protection, we can understand her comments about the diaspora with regards to material support in the form of housing. Furthermore, her comments reveal that the group provides an opportunity for immigrants to connect with a larger Nepalese social network to "be independent" of asking for assistance within kinship or friendship networks. In fact, throughout the course of the interview, she highlighted the role of independence from extended networks of family and friends in her narrative of adapting to life in the US. Through independence alone, she explained, she managed to "*struggle*," secure a job at a casino, buy a home with her husband, and purchase a new car.

Beyond Ratna's story, nearly all the people I interviewed who migrated to the SFBA in the 2010s mentioned the same popular Facebook groups either as an initial point of contact or as an informational source later for finding housing, work, and social events. One interviewee described: "*For example, if someone is moving to San Francisco, the first forum people will look for is Nepalese in San Francisco. You post there to see if there is any room available. When people first arrive it is hard for them to be a paying guest. So, the first center for people who arrive is there.*" These comments are interesting in that they highlight how the first instinct upon searching for housing for many Nepalese immigrants is to search through listings by Nepalese homeowners. This was a common sentiment across my interviews and supports the existing literature on co-ethnic social networks and solidarity. Also, this quote implies that living with co-ethnics is more than just finding housing upon arrival, but also an opportunity to create the "*first center*" of social contact with people who would presumably share a similar cultural background and understanding. This first center is the social infrastructure which then opens the doors to social contact with other co-ethnic Nepalese immigrants as several of my interviewees narrated (Wessendorf and Gembus, 2024). Furthermore, some of my interviewees also noted that housing arrangements with co-ethnics as found through the Facebook group would allow for a sense of leniency towards payments on time due to a shared sense of understanding of financial struggle and "*struggle*" upon initial arrival. This demonstrates how migrant networks are created and drawn upon for the purposes of social capital through a sense of ethnic allegiance. However, reliance on diasporic networks for access to housing also presents problems, as narrated by three of my interviewees with 'caste-oppressed' backgrounds. Anjali described*: "They don't make their discrimination so clear from the outside, but we can tell what they think. Even if you go to secure a rental, and you disclose your caste, they will make an excuse that the property is no longer available. I've heard that this happens to people.*" As this quote demonstrates, social networks are imbued with power dynamics; information and resources are selectively distributed and exchanged based on notions of deservingness. In these situations of power asymmetry, the reliance of people on co-ethnic social networks for social support and protection can further marginalize people into precarious situations of not finding a home or even becoming homeless, as has occurred to some individuals in the SFBA's Nepalese community.

# Chapter 5: Precarity amongst Nepalese Immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area

This section examines the multi-dimensional precarity of individuals upon arrival in the US. Specifically, interviewees discussed adjustments to a new country, the burden of care work, remittances, and financial and labor market precarity.

## 5.1 "Starting from Zero": Adjusting to a New Life

Several of my interviewees used this phrase "*starting from zero*" to describe what it was like for them to arrive in the US, secure employment and housing, build a community, and establish their lives there. Starting from zero implies a split in the lives (and particularly quality of life) of Nepalese immigrants upon their migration to the US. Previously middle or upper-middle class individuals often face de-skilling and downward social mobility upon arrival in the US that sits at odds with the lofty expectations of the 'American Dream' (Gurung, 2015). Unemployment, low-wage work, unpaid care work, gig work, and temporary jobs, in a context of high cost of living while facing transnational obligations to send remittances create a significant level of poverty in the Nepalese community in the SFBA. Language barriers, cultural adjustments, discrimination, and precarious legal statuses also structure the everyday experiences of many Nepalese immigrants in the US (Gurung, 2015; Hangen and Ranjit, 2010; Sijapati, 2014). As my interviews revealed, some of these precarious situations also arise from exclusions from diasporic social networks due to caste-based discrimination or personal situations such as time poverty as international students or asylum applicants experience. Several interviewees also spoke of difficult situations arising for domestic violence issues within the home and mental health challenges upon adjusting to life in a new country.

## 5.2 Social Obligations: Caregiving and Remittances

My interviews revealed that caregiving responsibilities further compound in-work poverty for immigrants, particularly in gendered ways. Interviewees with families would often narrate their experiences of precarity and drawing social protection from diasporic networks through the lens of childcare. For example, three of my interviewees, mothers with young children, also told me about the difficulties of managing long shifts at work with caregiving responsibilities. I was told frequently that the time poverty with respect to childcare is one of the motivators for why Nepalese immigrants are self-employed and run their own small businesses to also take care of their children simultaneously. Kamal told me that at some point he worked 20-hour shifts at below minimum wage at a Nepalese-owned gas station so he could earn enough to support his wife who was taking care of their child. Kamal explained that the matter of childcare remains of the largest stressors for young Nepalese immigrant families in the US. Kamal plans to organize some childcare initiatives at the Tamang community center by connecting children of young Nepalese families with the increasing elderly Nepalese community.

Transnational obligations to send remittances are another cause for financial precarity amongst the people I interviewed. For example, beyond the time pressure of caregiving for her child, Ratna also explained to me the pressure of remittances on the already very meager income earned through her job working part-time in a beauty salon in San Francisco. *"My husband is the eldest son in his family. There's a big expectation on him. […] There are a lot of expectations from his side of the family from us because we live in the US. There are a lot of expenses here for us. Only we know the struggle here. They don't know about how difficult it is to earn. We don't tell them our struggles. We figure it out as husband and wife."* Ratna's comments illustrate the dynamics around the transnational obligations of financial remittances to her husband's family in Nepal. Ratna and her husband need to balance the transnational expectations of large incomes with the reality of low wages and her family's financial precarity. From what I could tell, social networks are leveraged sometimes for financial support of community members in precarious financial situations. However, as financial pressures are a near universal experience within the community, financial pressure due to remittances was not a reason for fundraising in the GoFundMe pages I interacted with.

## 5.3 Precarious Employment and Social Networks

Upon arrival to the US, immigrants face numerous structural legal, financial, and social challenges and are often placed in precarious positions in the labor market (Gurung, 2015; Sijapati, 2014). With a couple of exceptions, most of the people I engaged with had a legal status and currently worked legally in the formal economy either in paid jobs via companies or platform apps or as self-employed running their own business. However, nearly everyone I interviewed had at some point worked in the informal economy.[viii] Kamal, a prominent realtor and community leader in the Tamang community, told me that he predicts some 85% of Nepalese immigrants to be in the service industry, with some 10% of Nepalese opening their own businesses, and the other 5% to be in higher-wage professional sectors. Though these are just well-informed estimates on Kamal's part, they illuminate a wider fact that many Nepalese immigrants are concentrated in low-paying and often precarious sectors such as in the platform economy as couriers and ride-share drivers, cashiers, gas station attendants, care work, manufacturing work, security guarding, and nursing, as based on my own observations.

Labor market segmentation plays a big role in the ubiquity of gig work in the Nepalese community in the SFBA. One out of three men I interviewed had been or are ride-share drivers, in combination with self-run businesses and part-time employment elsewhere. One Nepalese immigration lawyer I spoke with told me that many of the Uber drivers in downtown San Francisco are Nepalese asylum seekers who have received their work authorization documents. One of my interviewees, Raj who had driven part-time for Uber over 1 ½ years, explained that he felt stuck in the job as he didn't know how to move into the "*professional world*" of the formal labor market. *"Maybe like 7-8 years ago, very few Nepalese people were working in a good organization, most of the people were Uber or Lyft drivers. The people I knew with the most money were Uber and Lyft drivers. The other people I knew were restaurant workers, motel people, delivery drivers kind of stuff. […] Because there was no network, none of my friends were that professional. At least I didn't have network with those people. […] So it was my inspiration to move forward in the professional world."* Raj's comments illuminate the way in which ethnically segmented labor markets and reliance on a homogenous diasporic social network can also reduce social mobility (Gemkow and Neugart, 2011). Yet this is not always the case. One of Raj's undergraduate friends from Nepal became a key support at this point in Raj's life, helping him prepare for interviews and giving him guidance on entering the IT sector. Through the social capital unlocked via his close ties with a friend, Raj managed to enter a higher-wage professional sector relevant to his studies.

With the rapidly growing Nepalese diaspora in the US there are more opportunities for newcomers to secure social support from co-ethnics who are more established in the form of job opportunities, referrals, and information. At the same time, more settled Nepalese immigrants who have opened or manage small businesses such as restaurants, gas stations, or liquor stores are able to hire newcomers who are looking for work opportunities. Though their visas officially prohibit them from working, asylum seekers awaiting work authorization and international students are prone to go for cash-based jobs at restaurants and Nepalese-run businesses as they need to earn money to survive the high cost of living, pay tuition fees, and send remittances to their families in Nepal. In a phone call, Prakash, a vlogger who films travel and visa applications advice on YouTube for Nepalese people aspiring to move to the US, explained the six-month period during which people await their authorization as a *"survival period."* Though Prakash himself did not arrive in the US as an asylum seeker, he told me of the situation some of his friends faced who after long and dangerous migratory routes via Central America arrive with up to $60,000 in debts to friends and family. In this survival period once in the US, he explained that his friends turn to the diasporic network by looking for cash-based jobs at Nepalese-run businesses such as giftshops, grocery stores, and restaurants. Access to the labor market via information and referral hiring through the diasporic social networks is a form of social protection and risk mitigation in periods of financial precarity and unemployment

One interviewee discussed this and framed it as a *"win-win type of thing"* particularly across the service sector where many Nepalese immigrants are concentrated in the labor market. However, as explored above, the results of my fieldwork also found large reliance on closed social networks with respect to employment can lead to labor exploitation. Thereby, precarity of immigrants is not just addressed via social support gathered from social networks but can also be the result of members of the diaspora and of the diasporic networks themselves. For example, Rajendra, a prominent Dalit rights activist in Nepal and in the diaspora, explained how his positioning as a 'caste-oppressed' member of the Nepalese diaspora led him to be exploited in South Asian contexts in California. He shared: *"If I came from a dominant caste community, I could get a job easily. Social acceptance would also have been easy. My friends got jobs easily. I got a job in an Indian restaurant. My monthly salary was 1,200. Every day, I had to work more than 12 hours. 6 days in a week. […] I stayed only for one month. The owner misbehaved with me. I then worked in another restaurant. My co-workers were also like that. They used slurs. They used casteist slurs. […] So I felt very bad and I felt very depressed. Isolated. Not at one place, but everywhere. Everywhere, where I was visible.* " Rajendra's story illustrates the predominance of the caste-based hierarchies which have replicated in the Nepalese diaspora and manifest in discrimination, labor exploitation, and mental health effects (Pariyar et al., 2022). This finding confirms Dahinden's (2013) argument of 'network boundaries' within the diaspora which selectively include people based on socially mediated notions of belonging and deservingness.

Indeed, several posts in the Facebook group are from people complaining about abuse, mistreatment, or a lack of fair pay at jobs within businesses run by veteran immigrants. However, jobs found via co-ethnic referrals and the Facebook group are not necessarily jobs with fair pay and fair conditions. In these cases, particularly in situations of large power asymmetry, the heavy reliance on co-ethnic social networks for access to employment further marginalizes immigrants in precarious legal and financial positions (Delpy, 2024). This doesn't present a clear picture or answer as to whether social networks provide social protection or exploitation, but rather that these two are not mutually exclusive and are entangled in the messy reality of social relations and dependence.

# Chapter 6: Informal Social Protection through Digital Social Networks

This section examines how social networks in the digital form allow for wider ties across the diaspora. Co-ethnic Facebook groups help people access social capital beyond kinship and friendship ties.

## 6.1 Digital "Chautari" as a Mobile Commons

The digital group is a meeting place or "*chautari.*" The Facebook group is an important place for the promotion of cultural and social events by a host of organizations as well as private event organizations run by Nepalese entrepreneurs. These events such as the annual diasporic Association of Nepalis in Americas conference and gatherings are sponsored by Nepalese professionals such as real-estate agents, immigration lawyers, travel agents, restaurant owners, accountants, etc. The digital space for sociality provided by the Facebook group becomes a "mobile commons" in the words of Papadopoulous and Tsianos (2012). The mobile commons represent a "knowledge and affective reservoir that offers vital resources and energies to migrants on the road or when they arrive in a new place," (Papadopoulous and Tsianos (2012, p.190). In an interview with Anil, who founded the group in 2016, he explained why having a Facebook group within the diaspora is of importance. "*I realized that the Nepalese who cross the border and don't have papers or legal status can't find a job. These new people don't have many resources. They don't know where to go and how to get help. They don't know how to find a job. I wanted to*

*find a way to share information to them. So, I wanted to create a networking space. You know, in Nepal there are Choutari or gathering places. I was hoping as an admin for this Facebook group to foster connections between people."*

The posts of the group include informational support to newcomer Nepalese immigrants in the process of securing jobs and housing and informational support on legal status and immigration challenges. This brings Granovetter's (1973) "strength of weak ties" argument into focus. The Facebook group is an important place for the posting and soliciting of jobs, particularly cash-based temporary jobs at gas stations, liquor stores, and restaurants. However, it remained unclear to me whether people successfully secure jobs via the Facebook page that provide financial stability. Kaushal, who immigrated to Oklahoma in 2007 as a student, told me that prior to the development of digital social networking platforms, searching for opportunities came much more through word of mouth. *"When we came, there weren't a lot of community forums. Facebook was only run by people from colleges […] Earlier, we had to search in newspapers. We had to call people to find opportunities. But now, for those who have just arrived, there are more facilities. Like, they can look for a job on Neighborhood.com. They have a different way of searching for work. There are more opportunities."* Kaushal's comments represent a common sentiment amongst veteran immigrants that digital tools have made social networking and finding employment much easier for newcomer immigrants.

## 6.2 Digital Diasporic Networks as a Social Infrastructure of Support

The Facebook group is a vector for informal social protection as leveraged by community members. In the time span of two months over which I combed through posts and comments made in the Facebook page, I encountered several posts featuring links to GoFundMe fundraising pages for Nepalese immigrants who had unexpectedly fallen ill and needed financial support towards hospital bills and many posts on behalf of the cremation costs of deceased Nepalese immigrants. Posts also include material support for the fundraising of funerals and for people in precarious financial and legal positions as well as petitions aimed at the Nepalese embassy in Washington DC to extend consular services to the SFBA. Some of these posts stretched beyond the locality of the SFBA, extending to other areas in the US with large Nepalese diasporas. GoFundMe links featuring stories of co-ethnics stuck in tragic or precarious situations, are rapidly spread amongst people and were a frequent topic of informal discussion and in my interviews as well.

Another important dimension of the informal social protection provisioning nature of the Facebook group is the sharing of links for people to access formal social protection provisions by the federal and state governments. Some posts were made linking to government grant schemes for first-time homebuyers as well as a secure survey run by Nepalese social workers on experiences of workplace exploitation. Such sharing of information and collecting of data for the purposes of accessing state-run services are essential components of informal social protection. The digital social network may be used as a bridge of sorts to connect individuals with services they can benefit from. This theme also emerged in my interviews with Nepalese immigrants who work informally as social workers or are community leaders in associations and is elaborated upon later. Interestingly, amongst the posts I took note of and the people I interacted with, there was no mention of any expectation that the Nepalese government should provide any services towards its citizens abroad living in the US. This may be due to the expectations placed upon the US government to be a welfare provider due to the simplistic understanding of the US as a country in which "system chha", meaning there is a system, as opposed to Nepal as a country in which "system chhaina," meaning there is no system, due to poverty and corruption (Gurung, Amburgey, and Craig, 2021, p.1278).

The Facebook group makes the Nepalese diaspora visible and provides a transnational social space, neither solely in the US nor Nepal, for people to express grievances and ask for support, gather and share information, promote events and businesses, and interact and discuss issues that are relevant

to them as they adapt to living in the US. This affirms the argument of Brinkerhoff (2009) which posited that online social networks for immigrants are sites of forming hybrid-diasporic identities as people adapt to life in their destination context. The group thereby is a digital social space bounded by the national identity of Nepalese immigrants in the US and uses this ethnic allegiance as a currency for social capital to be leveraged by those in need.

# Chapter 7: Informal Social Protection in Diaspora Organizations

This final section of the research findings examines the role of formally organized diaspora organizations in providing social support to immigrants. This includes examining the role of organizations working specifically for the purposes of social support as well as cultural and religious organizations. Lastly, this section examines narratives of disillusionment of diaspora organizations and a call by some Nepalese community leaders to shift towards social work through state-provisioned resources.

## 7.1 Reciprocity: "I Need to Continue the Service"

Kaushal was busy in the kitchen of his newly opened Nepalese restaurant when I arrived, preparing a food order for students who were standing by the entrance of the shop. After the restaurant was empty, I sat with him in one of the booths as we sipped hot Nepalese *chiya* and he narrated his story. Upon the first few days of arriving in the US, Kaushal met a Nepalese server by chance in a restaurant in Oakland who connected him with the Wide Zone, an organization he later became the president of. The Wide Zone was founded in the Bay Area in 2009 for the purpose of supporting Nepalese students by a Nepali immigrant who is presently a well-known community leader and businessman. The organization caters to the needs of Nepalese students through material support such as assistance with buying groceries and securing apartments as well as the emotional support of hosting cultural and social events for people to interact and build a new network. The organization quickly spread domestically to Texas where there is a large Nepalese diaspora as well as transnationally to Nepal where five chapters were formed as well as Japan and Australia where many Nepalese have migrated for studies and work. The transnational element of the organization is testament to the transnationally networked lives of its members.

  As he was living in a motel upon first arriving, the Wide Zone immediately helped Kaushal find an apartment, which he proudly told me he still lives in, nine years later. He recounted how three members of the Wide Zone picked him up from the motel, bought him groceries, and cooked for him in the apartment they had ready for him. He said: *"You know before coming to the US, I had heard stories in Nepal, saying that Nepali people would cheat and scam other Nepalis. So, I was confused why they were doing so much for me. We didn't even know each other. […] They told me that their organization would help Nepali students. They said I need to continue the service to other students also in trouble if I ever come across any. So, from then on, I got involved and whenever there were students who arrived at the university with no place to stay, we would cook for them and find them a place to stay. That's how much we did. After receiving help from such an organization, it motivates you and created an appreciation for the organization itself, right?"* Evidently, Kaushal's interaction with this organization was an important source of social protection for him upon first arriving in the US in terms of financial, material, and emotional support (Vonneleich, 2022). Kaushal's experience also speaks to the mechanisms of instrumental reciprocity which underpin the functioning of informal social protection through the form of organizations and co-ethnic social networks (Du Toit and Neves, 2009; Vonneleich, 2022). A sense of ethnic solidarity and reciprocity formed the motive of his

receiving of support in the early days of his arrival in the US as well as his own participation as member and later leader of the organization. His narrative, like many others collected in this project, highlights the beneficial character of diaspora associations in the provision of emotional, material, and information assistance to Nepalese immigrants in need of support, particularly those who arrive as international students. Kaushal's story illuminates the reciprocity inherent in the functioning of diaspora organizations which form an essential part of the social infrastructure for newcomer and veteran immigrants alike. As Kaushal himself, it is interesting to note is that the community members who are now in leadership positions across organizations themselves were beneficiaries of social support when they had initially arrived in the US.

## 7.2 Diaspora Gatherings and Social Capital

Beyond organizations such as the Wide Zone which were founded explicitly for the purpose of social protection of Nepalese students in the SFBA, many diaspora organizations and are focused on cultural, religious, and social events. During my fieldwork, I attended several picnics, gatherings, and parties of the Nepalese diaspora. At the end of August, I attended a Hindu ritual at the newly constructed Nepalese temple in El Sobrante, California. Children were running around outside, and women wrapped in festive red saris danced to Nepalese music playing inside the temple. Beyond the dazzling outfits, loud music, and fragrant dishes, these gatherings are essential spaces for the social networking of the Nepalese community in the SFBA. Fundraised for and managed by prominent community members, the temple serves as an essential meeting point for younger and older generations of Nepalese immigrants, is an especially important space for the preservation of Nepalese language, customs, and rituals, and allows for the creation of social capital and ethnically bound solidarity within the diasporic community. Indeed, the mere socialization of migrants bounded by certain allegiances with each other allows for social capital to grow and essential information to be shared (Yamanaka, 2007; Bilecen et al. 2015). It was in such spaces that I met people who are active in the Nepalese community and who would share their insights onto the main issues facing newcomer immigrants and how the diaspora has and can further support them. Though community and social capital are strengthened at such gatherings, these gatherings are not necessarily focused on the provisioning of informal social protection to co-ethnics. However, informational, material, and emotional social support continues to be provisioned more on an individual basis, mediated by individual relationships.

### 7.2.1 Power Dynamics within Diaspora Organizations

Though such gatherings are open to the diaspora and advertised via Facebook groups, I found that the operation of diaspora organizations can reproduce power dynamics by becoming spaces for the financially well-off and settled Nepalese immigrants who have ample time, while not necessarily linking with the realities of newcomer immigrants or immigrants in more precarious situations. This also links with Portes, Escobar, and Radford's (2007, p.262) argument that "better-educated, higher status members of the respective communities and among those with longer periods of U.S. residence and secure legal status" were more likely to engage in the organizations, whereas newcomers are aiming to "concentrate in carving a niche in the host country" before involving themselves in collective pursuits." The time-poverty associated with multiple jobs and long work shifts for newcomer immigrants thereby also may hinder the presence of many newcomers at gatherings. On a related note, several interviewees also mentioned to me that gendered, age-based, and caste-based power dynamics persist in the Nepalese diaspora and structure leadership in the diaspora organizations. Particularly as Nepal is a multicultural and multiethnic society, a wide range of associations have formed based on

allegiances to different ethnicities and castes. Interviewees frequently expressed frustration for the splintered and divided nature of different associations and groups.

One example of this comes from the annual Annual Nepalis in America (ANA) conference which I attended on a sunny July day in the dimly lit auditorium of the Berkeley Adult School. The event taking place in the SFBA is a testament to the growing Nepalese diaspora present in this part of the US. The mission of the ANA is to "*promote unity and harmony among the Nepali Diaspora living in the Americas, foster Nepali identity & culture, and empower with knowledge to succeed.*" Attending the conference crystallized to me the importance of such transnational spaces such as the ANA annual convention in sharing knowledge and supporting the social networking between diaspora organizations, professionals, and individuals. The social networking at events such as these also sustain the "arrival infrastructures" for Nepalese immigrants (Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur, 2019). However, looking at the crowd it was clear that this event was predominantly a space for older, wealthier, and more established veteran immigrants as opposed to working class, younger, or newcomer people who have immigrated to the region. The panelists also heavily featured older, affluent, high-caste men (Indeed, I counted six Teslas in the parking lot of the venue!). It was strikingly clear by scanning the room that younger generations of newcomer immigrants who would benefit from the knowledge shared and social connections at the event were not present. There is clearly a gap between the different kinds of diasporic organizations within the Nepalese community. Drawing on the idea of power dynamics within migrant associations as discussed by Kaşlı, (2016), it is evident that there are representational gaps within diasporic organizations between the settled immigrants and newcomer immigrants. Such power dynamics within diaspora organizations highlight how social networks are policed by symbolic boundaries based on notions of deservingness related to gender, age, education, establishment, and legal status (Dahinden, 2013; Kaşlı, 2016).

## 7.3 Turning from Cultural Events to the "Grassroots"

A few of my interviewees, well-known individuals who are engaged in social work within the Nepalese diasporic community of the SFBA, shared with me that they were disillusioned by the frivolous nature of diasporic social events as well as the caste-ism prevalent. Both hailing from caste-oppressed communities, Rajendra and Anjali, for example, shared that they felt their contributions in their roles in well-known diasporic organizations are sidelined by higher-caste members. Anil, the founder and moderator of the popular Facebook group I examined in this project, explained to me that though he used to be active in various formal diasporic organizations, he felt severely disillusioned by "*thulo manche*" or important people who dominate Nepalese diaspora events for image and political influence in Nepal and amongst the diaspora. "*After having some bad experiences in organizations that I couldn't foresee, I left these groups. Still, I try to help people in my own time. I am not affiliated with any social organization. […] I feel sad about this. Even after moving here, Nepali people are still doing the same politics, the dirty politics. They say they do social work, but really it is about politics. And that social work doesn't feel transparent. It's as if they just want to earn money. That's also a big challenge now.*" Anil's critique of diaspora organizations and the 'social work' of veteran immigrants for their personal gain was echoed by several interviewees. As Anil demonstrates the boundary between altruistic social support to co-ethnics and profit-driven or instrumental reciprocity is less clear than the literature may present. The reality is a messy and complex dynamic between diaspora organizations and the "*thulo manche*" who run them and members who need social support. Similarly, Gita, a well-known social justice advocate in the community who helped several of my interviewees on different occasions, shared that she avoids attending diasporic gatherings with prominent community leaders. This decision stems from the information Gita knows about exploitation, violence, and wage-theft on the part of many prominent Nepalese community leaders in their businesses as people confide in and ask for support from Gita.

Furthermore, a lack of information within the community of what services are available and misconceptions about benefitting from state welfare schemes may keep people reliant on their networks for social support without turning to the available resources. For example, one of my interviewees described to me how he was hesitant to register for food stamps under a state-provided welfare benefit as he believed it would jeopardize his chance getting access to employment or housing. Narratives of being a good immigrant who doesn't rely on the state for support but rather manage to be independent and draw on community for support may be feeding into this narrative as well. Finally, he was encouraged to register for the scheme by his acquaintances and members in the diaspora. Gita also lamented that the community relies too much on social networks for social provisioning and explained that diaspora organizations should examine how to provide a "*link up*" with state-provisioned services. Gita's concern as a member of the diaspora was more directed at helping regular Nepalese immigrants "*at the grassroots*" get health, legal, counselling, and financial support from state-funded providers. Another interviewee of mine explained to me once how Gita had helped him pay for his hospital bills by registering him for Obamacare and getting him access to financial support from hospital funds. Several of my interviewees, including Nepalese diaspora Facebook group administrators, mental health experts, and social workers, told me that they believe the Nepalese community needs greater insight into how state services are provided. For example, Purna, one of my interviewees who works in a large diaspora organization, seeks to increase the connections between state- and community-provisioned social support by organizing informational events for the Nepalese community in the SFBA in collaboration with local county authorities about health insurance and community services. This perhaps illustrates a wider point that an over-reliance on social networks alone cannot provide people the services and resources they need to secure proper social protection and get access to information to improve their lives. Instead, as Calder and Tanhchareun (2014) argued, informal social protection systems, as the ones I've described throughout this paper, are strengthened through formal social protection systems by way of reliable services and resources.

# Chapter 8: Conclusions

The people I encountered and interviewed narrated their experiences of arrival in the US and securing of social protection through the lens of social networks, regarding access to housing and jobs, financial support, and services. Nepalese immigrants leverage their social networks to secure informal social protection in the face of precarity and in the process of adaptation to the US through use of friend and family networks, digital groups, and migrant associations. Particularly ties between veteran and newcomer immigrants are essential for newcomers to get access to informational, material, and emotional support. Thereby, transnational co-ethnic social networks become social infrastructures for newcomer immigrants and are a part of the growing migration industry which grows in opposition to the increasingly strict migration management imposed by nation-states (Hernández-León, 2013; Lucht, 2013). The study also examined the different kinds of financial, legal, and social precarity that research participants were facing, particularly as they are compounded by transnational remittance and familial caregiving obligations. With respect to the labor market, findings showed that diasporic social networks can help immigrants access employment, particularly through informal labor agreements, though such jobs also often remain precarious and with low wages, and lead to ethnic labor market segmentation.

The findings also illustrate that diasporic networks are imbued with power dynamics between veteran and newcomer immigrants and operate based on the selective logic of deservingness, particularly in the case of Nepalese immigrants around caste (Pariyar et al., 2022). Another important finding confirms the role of digital social networks in promoting informational support through the

mobile commons and fostering a social infrastructure for Nepalese immigrants complementary to real-life spaces and networks. Furthermore, this study also illustrates how diasporic organizations are an important space for immigrants to network and gain access to social capital, though these spaces often are skewed in their representation of more privileged immigrants in less precarious situations. The narrative of disillusionment in diaspora organizations, which emerged amongst a significant amount of my interviewees, also highlights this dynamic. Due to such power dynamics and ambiguity in the provisioning of social support, an over-reliance on social networks cannot fully fulfil people's needs for social protection. Thereby, I've aimed to highlight the complexities of how social networks form an important, albeit not complete, informal social protection strategy for Nepalese immigrants in the US. As the Nepalese diaspora will continue to expand in the US, it remains to be seen how diaspora organizations and digital communities will continue to absorb newcomers, provide social support, adapt to life in the US, and build transnational communities.

There are several limitations to this study in terms of studying the informal social protection strategies of a diverse range of Nepalese immigrants in the US. Firstly, this study does not equally represent the experiences of newcomer and veteran immigrants due to challenges reaching newcomers. Newcomers were difficult to reach due to a lack of time due to long work hours as well as a hesitancy amongst my interviewees to refer newly arrived immigrants to me. Thereby, I engaged more with settled immigrants' narratives, particularly those who are active as social workers and community leaders, than on the narratives of recently arrived immigrants. Further studies could engage in a longitudinal study tracking a few individuals upon arrival in the US who arrive through different visa channels and migratory routes in terms of how they build and use their social networks; this would allow for a more in-depth examination of informal social protection dynamics in the context of immigration and adaptation to a destination country.  Such a study design would allow for a more detailed understanding of how informal social protection is created and drawn upon from a network of people as challenges are faced in real time.

Secondly, it was intentional in this study to focus on a diverse range of Nepalese immigrants positioned differently in legal, economic, and social hierarchies to draw out different experiences and the commonalities across these with respect to accessing informal social protection. The intention of this is to not fall into the trap of essentializing a large group of immigrants. However, due to this choice, this study does not examine the unique experiences of a certain group of Nepalese immigrants. Future research on this topic could focus specifically on the informal social protection needs and strategies of one group of Nepalese immigrants by legal status such as international students, undocumented migrants, or asylum seekers and connect their informal support strategies to the formal legal, political, economic, and social regimes which marginalize them. Furthermore, for practicality purposes, this study focused on the Nepalese diaspora in isolation from other immigrant communities, though a few interconnections with the wider South Asian diaspora were mentioned in interviews. Scholars have critiqued the essentializing assumption of national or ethnic identity for studies on immigration and social networks and have argued instead for a shift towards examining more complex intra-group hierarchies such as gender and class (Dahinden, 2013; Ryan, 2011). Future studies could examine the relationships between immigrant networks of different ethnicities and how solidarities are formed or limited based on similar working conditions or legal statuses. It would be interesting to examine how bounded solidarity based on socio-economic status rather than ethnicity or national origin would affect the informal social protection derived from social networks.

Topics which I did not have the space to explore in this paper included domestic violence abuse and mental health issues within the community. Interviewees shared experiences of how the diaspora helped support people in such situations by linking them with Asian-American domestic violence and mental health support groups and state-provided services. Further in-depth examination

of these issues in the nascent Nepalese diaspora would be fruitful and beneficial for the community and local service providers.

Stemming from this ethnographic project, some recommendations aimed at federal US government authorities could be to change regulations around work authorization for international students and asylum applicants. By reducing the work regulations for international students and asylum applicants, people would not have to resort to informal labor agreements that do not protect against labor exploitation and wage theft. Such a policy change would reduce the vulnerability of newcomer immigrants by allowing them to enter formal employment contracts with entitlements and minimum wage guarantees, all whilst also contributing to local economies. Considering my research findings, local and state government authorities should increase outreach to the nascent Nepalese immigrant community, via collaboration with community organizations and leaders as well as providing official translation services. Based on the findings of this study, I would also recommend to Nepalese diaspora organizations and community leaders to ensure their leadership structures reflect the interests of the wider community. Increased representation of and genuine collaboration with youth, women, and marginalized 'caste-oppressed' people in Nepalese diaspora community leadership would help reduce exclusion from Nepalese social networks. Nepalese diaspora organizations can also continue to gather insights and data on the amount of Nepalese in the SFBA and understand their needs and challenges, particularly paying attention to the silent issues of mental health conditions and domestic violence. Using these insights, community leaders can then build bridges with local city and county service providers and social workers to connect people in precarious situations with the support and social protection needed. Lastly, I would also recommend that diaspora organizations continue and increase awareness raising events and informational/practical programs designed to bridge the gap between the Nepalese community and access to formal social services offered by the California state and US federal governments.

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# Notes

i Ton and timi are diminutive or informal pronouns used in Nepalese, often also denoting familiarity.

ii I've selected 'Nepalese immigrants' as the default term as the results of a 2010 survey of Nepalese diaspora in the US by Thapa-Oli and Yang (2024) found nearly 72% of respondents to prefer 'Nepalese' as opposed to 'Nepalese-American,' 'American,' or' 'Asian-American'. Furthermore, as this research project engages with first generation individuals who migrated to the US in their (early) adult life, 'Nepalese immigrants' seems more suitable as opposed to 'Nepalese-Americans' which may be more applicable to the second generation.

iii The statistics counting Nepalese immigrants in the US are likely a significant underestimation due to the lack of a designated Nepalese category in census data (Hangen and Ranjit, 2010).

iv Social capital has been defined and articulated differently by scholars, with much scholarship drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, and Portes (Mumtaz, 2022). Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as one of several forms of capital which constitute an individual's asset within interpersonal relations; Bourdieau argues that the accumulation of social capital is permeated by and actively reproduces power dynamics. With less regard to such power dynamics, Coleman (1988) focuses more on social capital as a resource available for collective action and cooperation within a closed social network which functions based on reciprocal trust (Sha, 2021). Putnam (2000) adds more nuance to the concept of social capital by focusing on the bridging and bonding dimensions, as examined later, arguing that social capital allows for greater civic participation and wellbeing. Putnam (1993, p.35) defines social capital as "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit." Expanding upon the social capital literature, the stream of scholarship emanating from Portes (1998) focuses on the double-edged nature of social capital and the dynamics of exclusion and social control within networks.

v Before proceeding, I would like to attach a small note as a caveat. The Nepalese immigrants in the Bay Area whom I met and interacted with represent a broad swath of people, with different backgrounds both urban and rural, across gender and ethnic/caste divisions, and representing different visa statuses. Each of these markers of identity position their narratives differently, in the way they reached the US, their struggles upon arrival, and their social networking with other Nepalese immigrants. As Gurung (2015) wrote in her study of Nepalese immigrants in the US, the US immigration visa regimes structure the life-worlds and socio-economic and labor conditions of immigrants. Some people I engaged with were naturalized as US citizens and had given up their Nepalese nationality due to the strict single nationality policy of Nepal. Several had secured a permanent residency Green Card. Some people arrived as students, are presently students, or seek to pursue graduate studies at a US college or university. Yet others I met and spoke with were in precarious legal positions as asylum applicants and temporary protected status holders, had previously entered the US illegally, or overstayed their visa and were undocumented for a period of time.

vi I have decided to not name the Facebook group due to privacy concerns and ethical considerations, particularly given that the group is private and membership based. Henceforth, I will refer to the group as 'the Facebook group' or 'the group'.

vii This is particularly so, as it turns out that several of the prominent Facebook groups of Nepalese immigrants in the SFBA contain the same posts and announcements as each other as users are usually members of more than just one group. It falls outside of the scope of this paper to examine multiple Facebook groups and investigate such dynamics further, though it would make for an interesting further study to examine how immigrants navigate their diverse digital diasporic forums for differential purposes.

viii Official statistics are hard to come by for the Nepalese community in the SFBA, though several community leaders of diasporic organizations mentioned to me that data collection was the next step they planned to take to better understand the needs of the diaspora.