Unsettling the American Dream: Mobility, Migration and Precarity among Translocal Himalayan Communities during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

New York City (NYC) garnered significant national and international attention when it emerged as the coronavirus epicentre in the USA, in spring 2020. As has been widely documented, this crisis has disproportionately impacted minority, immigrant and marginalized communities. Among those affected were people from Mustang, Nepal, a Himalayan region bordering Tibet. This community is often rendered invisible within larger Asian immigrant populations, but the presence of Mustangis in the US has transformed their translocal worlds, lived between Nepal and NYC. Seasonal mobility and life-stage wage labour in cosmopolitan Asia have been common in Mustang for decades. More permanent moves to NYC began in the 1990s. These migrations were based on assumptions about attaining financial stability in the US in ways deemed unattainable in Nepal. An ethnographic focus on one translocal Mustangi family frames this discussion of how COVID-19 has overturned previously held ideas around migration to NYC and uncovered new forms of precarity. The authors build on theories of transnationalism and translocality to position migration as a cyclical process whereby the well-being of Mustangis in Nepal and NYC rests on the reliability of global migratory networks and translocal kinship relations — a basis for security and belonging that COVID-19 has challenged and reconfigured.

INTRODUCTION

At the intersection of 74th street and Roosevelt Avenue, in the heart of Jackson Heights, Queens, is a T-Mobile store. This small kiosk, tucked in between a popular momo (dumpling) joint and a store selling South Asian style wedding attire, is a translocal community hub. It serves as a meeting spot for people from Mustang, Nepal, who have made their way to, and are making their way in, New York City (NYC). The store is a place to engage in community gossip, purchase SIM cards for those recently arrived, participate in community-led loan transactions (dhukuti), or simply stash belongings, knowing they will be safe while doing errands or grabbing a quick Nepali

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meal. It is a running joke within the Mustang-American community that this T-Mobile store is the community’s ‘Google’. It is a literal and lived search engine: a central reference point, a space where knowledge is generated and shared among the few thousand people from Mustang who live in NYC, but who also, by virtue of kinship connections, economic obligation and related senses of belonging and identity, also live translocal lives, between New York and the vastly different high-altitude mountain environment which is their ancestral homeland.

According to the official website of New York State, Queens is the most ethnically diverse borough in NYC;\(^1\) it is one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. Queens is not just a capital of linguistic diversity, but also an unparalleled testament to the possibilities of coexistence among those whose differences are profound (Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro, 2016: 194). The exceptional internationalism and intersectionality of Queens have made it a hub for immigrants from all over the world and from all walks of life, who have found sanctuary in Queens among people who share their language, food and culture (Stewart et al., 2019). Mustangis and thousands of other international (im)migrants making their way to NYC share more than just the space; they also share ideas about pursuing their versions of ‘the American Dream’. Hence, the Mustangi experience in NYC is both unique and more universal.

Mustangis migrate to the USA for many reasons, but perhaps the single most overriding explanation is encompassed by a frequently used Mustangi saying that, in America, ‘system chha’ and in Nepal, ‘system chhaina’.\(^2\) This English–Nepali hybrid expression — which means, essentially, that a socio-economic safety net (system) exists (chha) in the US but does not exist (chhaina) in Nepal — is a way of talking about how America is a less precarious place than Nepal. It is notable that the languages at play in this code-switching phrase do not include the variant of Tibetan spoken in Mustang but the phrase is, instead, built from the dominant languages of nation states: English and Nepali. In contrast to Nepal, the US is envisioned as a place of reliable and high-quality healthcare, transportation, educational facilities, higher-income opportunities and basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity and drinking water. This ‘system’ refers to state-led social systems, as opposed to locally rooted community systems of care and assistance. This distinction, in turn, allows for a deeper analysis of how people’s accessibility and inaccessibility to a proposed ‘system’ alters perceptions and experiences of migration. An exploration of ‘system chha/chhaina’, especially in the context of a pandemic, also points to the fallacies and shortcomings of relying on national systems and creates space for

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1. Overview of Queens, NYC: www.ny.gov/counties/queens (accessed 6 February 2021).
2. We do not provide a linguistic analysis of the Nepali verb ‘chha/chhaina’ (to be). Rather, we use these terms as an analytical entry point to explore how the Mustang community perceives migration to the US in comparison to opportunities in Nepal.
community-based translocal caretaking practices between Nepal and the US. As we will show, for Mustangis, like many other immigrants, this sense that the US has something fundamental that their home country does not is at once an aspirational narrative, a lived experience and a precarious reality.

The US is not the first or only place to which those from Mustang have migrated. For centuries, Himalayan communities from Mustang, Nepal, have engaged in an array of livelihood strategies to survive and thrive in their high-altitude villages (Craig, 2020; Murton, 2017; Ramble, 2008). Agriculture, animal husbandry and trans-Himalayan trade (primarily grain, salt and wool) defined patterns of subsistence in and through mountain environments (van Spengen, 1995: 23). In the 20th century, these strategies came to include engagement with seasonal commodity trade and life-stage wage labour abroad, primarily in South and Southeast Asian cities. However, over the past two decades, these dynamics of mobility, economic strategy, educational aspiration and attendant social change have come to include more permanent forms of migration, principally to NYC (Craig, 2002, 2020). While Mustangis comprise a small percentage of new immigrants in NYC, the impacts of depopulation back in Mustang are stark and have come to define the lives of young and old alike (Childs et al., 2014).

These aspirations of mobility and patterns of migration hinge on several assumptions, all of which circulate around the idea that the value of hard work and the US dollar would make the many sacrifices worth it. These assumptions are as follows: first, that the US presents a more stable ‘system’ — economically, politically and socially — than Nepal ever could; second, that remittances as well as the circulation of people and capital between Nepal and NYC will enable better futures, particularly at a time of rapid socio-environmental change in the Himalaya; and, third, that economic investments in Mustang itself can be profitable, given its unique cultural and environmental allure as a tourist destination. Translocal lives have been built on these premises — ‘American Dream’ propositions that play out in NYC but that rest on lived experiences rooted in Mustang.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged each of these assumptions. In the spring of 2020, Himalayan and culturally Tibetan New Yorkers, including those from Mustang, found themselves at the epicentre of the pandemic (Correal and Jacobs, 2020). For many, access to healthcare and social service payments such as unemployment benefits has been limited; the ‘system’ has been challenging to navigate for socio-cultural and linguistic reasons. Many Mustangi-New Yorkers are essential or otherwise vulnerable workers: in service industries such as restaurants and grocery stores, as healthcare workers and childcare providers, in construction, and in the gig economy, including as drivers for Uber. The physical and economic impact of the pandemic on these livelihood strategies has disrupted remittances, which, in turn, has made life for families back in Nepal more challenging, as they also experience lockdown and associated economic uncertainty as well as even more limited access to healthcare. As we have learned, this pandemic
is disproportionately impacting minority, immigrant and marginalized communities within the US and around the world. In this sense, Mustangi experiences are not exceptional (Borjas, 2020; Lieberman-Cribbin et al., 2020). Yet the ways in which individuals, families and community networks living within and between Mustang and NYC are making sense of this COVID-19 moment, in light of the assumptions about migration, mobility and socioeconomic security on which their decisions to migrate to NYC have rested, provide insights into important questions about migration in and beyond the COVID moment.

This article asks how the challenges of a global pandemic have upended ideas about what migration affords. We argue that the current COVID moment has complicated the notion that migrating to the US will ensure financial stability for Mustangis living in both Nepal and NYC, and has posed serious challenges to the assumption undergirding migration — that there is a ‘system’ in the US that will protect them. The relevance of ‘system chha/chhaina’ to the Mustangi communities in Nepal and NYC has become even more apparent this past year. In what follows, we explore this concept of ‘system chha/chhaina’ to argue that although the US is seen by Mustangis as a place where a social welfare system does exist in ways absent in Nepal, the pandemic and concurrent social and political unrest have simultaneously exposed major faults in the system and reinforced the importance of translocal networks of care and community. Though focused on one relatively small community and the unique ways that its members have carved their lives between Nepal and NYC, this article contributes empirically and conceptually to broad scholarly understandings of transnationalism and translocal lives (Appadurai, 1995; Basch et al., 1994), with respect to its impacts on cultural and socio-economic well-being and immigrant precarity (Butler, 2004; De León, 2015; Paret and Gleeson, 2016), as well as dynamics of identity and belonging (Craig, 2020; Shneiderman, 2015).

LOVING THE COVID-19 MOMENT: RESEARCH METHODS

On 7 March 2020, as many in the Mustang community of NYC were preparing to celebrate a birthday and wedding with a gathering of over 500 people, Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a State of Emergency. The city began locking down, imposing strict social-distancing measures and enforcing the temporary closure of many businesses. During this time, Nepal began to see an uptick in COVID-19 cases, with the Government of Nepal announcing a nationwide lockdown on 24 March. As Mustangis in both Nepal and NYC grappled with the devastating effects of lockdown and the consequent loss of employment and remittances, NYC became the epicentre of the outbreak in the US (Behbahani et al., 2020). Clearly, the immense loss those from Mustang have faced as a result of the pandemic is not unique, with global case numbers standing at 177 million at the time of writing, and the
concurrent social mobilization around systemic racism shaking the US and the world. However, Mustangis are among those populations disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and forms of structural inequality (Gurung et al., 2020).

One cannot overstate the huge risk of COVID-19 infection for new immigrants and other marginalized communities; the pandemic has laid bare the relationship between structural inequality and health outcomes (Ross, 2020). Beyond risks to personal health prompted by the virus, immigrants face higher levels of precarity as a result of linguistic barriers, job insecurity, unequal access to healthcare, and legal uncertainty around visa and citizenship status (Shrestha, 2019). Mustangi households coped with ill family members and the loss of income. Even so, many continued to work through the pandemic, either because their jobs were deemed essential or out of financial necessity. As these realities unfolded in NYC, family members back in Mustang were struck by the fact that they could no longer rely on remittances; nor could they turn to tourism as Nepal shut its national borders. While members of NYC’s Mustang community have been adapting to these ongoing challenges, they are also coming to terms with the precarious nature of their lives as a diasporic community in the US and questioning the assumption that attaining ‘the American Dream’ equates to a level of stability, security and protection that would be unattainable in Nepal.

The data for this article are based on ethnographic research including participant observation, surveys and semi-structured interviews collected over time as a result of each author’s academic engagements in Mustang, Nepal, and within Mustang communities of NYC. We have chosen to collaborate on this piece, leveraging our diverse positionalities and this unique global moment. We aim to unpack the three assumptions mentioned above, around which migration between Nepal and NYC have been built, examining how each has either unravelled or been fundamentally changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We position these assumptions within their historical and social context and describe the ways each has been overturned by the socio-political upheaval of the past year.

We delve ethnographically into each assumption by focusing on the story of one family from Mustang, whose members (names are actual) now reside in and between Mustang, Kathmandu and NYC. This is the family of Tashi W. Gurung, this article’s first author. His parents, Kunga Dhakpa and his wife Tamding Wangmo, both 70 years old, are from Mustang. After Tamding fell ill 17 years ago, they moved to the neighbourhood of Boudha, in Kathmandu, where a growing population of people from Nepal’s northern Himalayan regions reside. Kunga has since split his time between Mustang, caring for the agricultural fields in the spring and summer, and Kathmandu, caring for Tamding and enjoying the warmer winters in the Kathmandu

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3. Further details are available upon request from the corresponding author.
valley. Kunga and Tamding raised six children (Kunga, Tsering, Wangmo, Lhakpa, Chimi and Tashi) who all migrated to the US between 2004 and 2010 and currently live in NYC.

This family’s experiences of transnational migration, socio-economic change, caretaking across international borders, and challenges associated with the division of labour among Himalayan communities, are distinctive but simultaneously contain elements that are familiar components of other immigrant stories, including but not limited to the Mustang community. Unlike many other translocal Mustangi households, wherein at least one member of the younger generation remains in Nepal, all of the children in this family are in NYC, while their elderly parents reside full-time in Nepal. This family includes siblings who span two demographic generations and represent a wide (and still quite uncommon) spectrum of educational trajectories as well as diverse labour strategies: an aspiring scholar, a private-school teacher and US college graduate, an Uber driver, a babysitter, and one sibling who is retired. In other ways, though, the case study of this family echoes the lives of the majority of Mustangis, in their reasons for migrating, their social and financial commitments to family and community on two continents, and the ways they maintain these connections. It is also a story of sacrifice, precarity and hope that is shared by many other immigrant communities across time and space, and in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SITUATING MUSTANG: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND TRANSLOCAL LIVES

In order to understand what makes Mustang’s migration narrative at once unique and universal, including in the face of COVID-19, we situate this place and its people in terms of its geography, history and patterns of mobility. Located high in Nepal’s Himalaya (see Figure 1), Mustang District is home to approximately 14,000 people, most of whom speak local variants of Tibetan, are practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, and have relied for centuries on agriculture, animal husbandry and regional trade to survive and thrive in this high-altitude environment. Prior to the creation of the nation state of Nepal in 1769, the region had been home to a succession of local rulers, dating back to the 14th century, chief among them being the King (N. raja, T. gyalpo) of Lo, the northernmost region of the district which today borders the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. After the mid-18th century, Mustang was annexed into what remained for centuries the world’s only Hindu kingdom, became for a time a constitutional monarchy and multi-party parliamentary democracy (1990–2008), and has been, since 2008, the secular Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. The 25th in the line of Mustang rulers, King Jigme Dorje Palbar Bista, was stripped of his national recognition as a local raja in 2008, after Nepal’s larger political
Figure 1. Map of Mustang, Nepal
Source: Tashi W. Gurung and Geo Data: Open Data Nepal
transition, although he and his family retain strong local cultural, political and socio-economic authority in the region. Bista died in 2016, at the age of 86, having ushered his people through massive changes during the 20th and 21st centuries, from the Chinese annexation of Tibet and the presence of Tibetan resistance fighters in Mustang between 1960 and 1974, to major national political transitions and a 10-year civil war (Cowan, 2016, McGranahan, 2010; Pettigrew, 2010).

Dating back to its early founding and connections to the western Tibetan kingdoms of Gungthang, and up until the present day, Mustang has been a major corridor of trans-Himalayan trade. Lower Mustang has been part of the popular Annapurna trekking circuit since the late 1970s; the upper reaches of Mustang were considered to be a ‘forbidden kingdom’ and were only opened to foreigners in 1992. Officials attribute the restriction of foreigners in Upper Mustang until this time to the safety of international visitors after the closure of the border given geopolitical sensitivities. However, present-day Mustang is anything but isolated. Over the past two decades, the region has experienced rapid development of roadways (Murton, 2017, 2019; Murton and Lord, 2020), electricity, and the building of new guest houses, hotels and restaurants to facilitate the influx of tourism — an industry which has become a primary mode of income generation. Over roughly the same period, seasonal migration for petty trade or wage labour to other Asian countries, primarily India, has continued, and education- and economic-based migration to the US and Europe has increased.

Centuries of trade relations with neighbouring Tibet and India mean that mobility is not new to the culturally Tibetan people in along the trans-Himalayan borderlands (Bauer, 2004; Ratanapruck, 2007). However, the contemporary configurations of migration have radically reformulated what it means to belong to high mountain Nepal. The migration of many people from Mustang to the US, with the majority of migrants residing in NYC, began in the mid-1990s (Craig, 2002, 2004, 2011, 2020). This initial wave of migrants assumed they would stay temporarily, as they had done in the 1980s and early 1990s in places such as Japan and Korea, earning money to repay debts and create savings for families back in Nepal, as well as to generate cash for school fees, for building materials for new homes in the village or in urban centres of Kathmandu or Pokhara, for investments in guest houses, seasonal trading supplies and new forms of transportation in Mustang. This migratory route to the US increased in popularity throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s; simultaneously, state and local development initiatives sought to build roads linking Mustang to urban areas of Nepal, India and China, and economic opportunities as well as new questions about Mustang’s environmental and economic future began to surface. It is estimated that over 2,000 Mustangis — of the approximately 9,000 people from culturally Tibetan regions of that district — now live in NYC, forming a substantially large part of Mustang’s diaspora (Craig, 2020: 6).
Many push-pull factors have contributed to this reality. Rural mountain communities in developing nations like Nepal have very low adaptive capacity and hence suffer disproportionately from the consequences of climate change (Gurung, 2017). Emerging from the educational and economic constraints of village life, the environmental impacts of climate change felt in Himalayan communities such as Mustang, and the political instability of Nepal, migration has come to be seen as a ‘normative step in the life course and a defining feature of … society’ (Childs and Choedup, 2018: 4). Migration to NYC and other international locations is firmly rooted in the assumption that this mobility will result in a more secure, even prosperous, lifestyle for households in Nepal and abroad. The emphasis on working hard and earning in foreign currency is a pervasive notion in Mustang and one that has led to the district experiencing one of the highest rates of depopulation in Nepal (Childs et al., 2014). The diversification of household labour by sending one or more individuals abroad is a decision that weighs heavily on the minds of parents who wish to give their children better educational and employment opportunities. For Mustangi youth, migration is seen as a necessary step to attain financial security and a higher social status — both a coveted rite of passage and a family obligation. What began as a small number of individuals (mostly young and middle-aged men) in NYC has morphed into the resettlement of entire families, with younger generations now starting families of their own in the US.

Still, Mustang remains at once a local and a global place: a region of interconnection and interdependence, across vast physical and experiential distances. We argue that Mustang is a paragon of translocal (Appadurai, 1995; Banerjee, 2011) global community — one that productively challenges scholarly understandings of the emplacement of identity and belonging. Moving beyond the concept of place as rooted in locality or a territorially based community (Massey, 1991), we situate this article within theories of transnationalism and belonging, rooted in studies of migration that recognize the large web of relations, experiences and understandings that contribute to a ‘global sense of place’ (ibid.). Diverging from concepts like migrant assimilation and reassimilation, this story of one Mustang family shows how people who move between Nepal and NYC enact cyclical migratory pathways, complicating what it means to be ‘home’ or ‘abroad’ as they maintain close social and economic relationships with their ancestral homelands. Migration itself is a phenomenon that occurs at the intersection between those who migrate and those who remain. Transnational flows of people, goods, cash and ideas are an essential part of the cultural, social, economic and political life of all from Mustang today, regardless of where they live. Furthermore, disruptions of such flows in moments of upheaval and unpredictability, such as a global pandemic, have consequences that reverberate across local and national borders, and uncover the precarity of those who rely on mobility — theirs and/or others’ — to support themselves and their families.
Our work builds on early scholarship on transnationalism and translocality (Appadurai, 1995; Basch et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2003) which recognizes that ‘migrants are often embedded in multi-layered multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1003). However, Mustang’s historical position as an important site of economic activity but a locus of political, geographical and cultural marginalization in Nepal demands that we work against methodological nationalism which takes the nation state as a given in social analysis. Moving beyond static typologies of migrant identities, modernization theories and historical-structuralist thought (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), we view migration as a process ‘whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders’ (Brettell, 2008: 120). We build on theories of translocality to refer to diasporic Mustang communities ‘whose identities travel across nation states and are reconstituted in localities that transcend national territorial boundaries making these spaces translocal rather than transnational’ (Banerjee, 2011: 334; also see Etzold, 2017). Focusing on locality within studies of migration and mobility allows for an understanding of belonging and identity that is predicated on the ever-changing socio-political contexts through which migrants move. This sense of translocality remains strong even after migrants put down roots in new locations, as has been the case for those from Mustang in NYC.

As a concrete example of these dynamics, we offer this: in December 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic raging, community members from Upper Mustang (Lo) purchased a building for nearly US$ 3.8 million in Queens, with the goal of transforming it into a community centre. It took a subset of the Mustang community (approximately 800 individuals) nearly a decade to raise the cash with which they bought this property outright — funds raised primarily through rotating credit systems (N. dhukuti), loans from community members and donations. Although infrastructural renovations are needed and income streams will need to be identified to repay loans associated with this work, the purchase of this property is a remarkable achievement, signifying not only a move towards establishing themselves firmly in NYC, as other immigrant communities have done, but also creating a space to forge enduring translocal connections by providing services such as language and culture classes, elder care and spaces for religious worship. The building serves as a symbol of strength as the Mustangi community in NYC continues to grow. The realization of this long-term goal is also an indication of the community’s intention to retain their sense of place, both within Mustang’s cultural heritage and in NYC. In this way, we view the constantly changing networks and connections that expand notions of place as territorially or spatially fixed to encompass what Massey (1991: 28) refers to as an ‘extroverted’ sense of place that integrates the global and the translocal.
In the context of a translocal community like that from Mustang, migration is a process through which belonging and affective identity are transformed and reaffirmed (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin, 2011; Shneiderman, 2015). We argue that the examples from Mustang help us to understand migration as a fundamentally cyclical process. The Mustang case shows how people who move away also remain an integral part of household and village-level politics, socio-economic systems and ecological change back in their ancestral communities. Craig refers to this cyclical and differentiated movement of Mustangis through time and space as the ‘khora of migration’ (Craig, 2020; Craig and Gurung, 2018). As a concept emerging from Himalayan and Tibetan communities, it is an ‘English gloss for the interrelated and culturally salient processes of circumambulation (as around a sacred site) and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of cyclic existence’ (Craig, 2020: 8). This concept of khora ‘illustrates patterns of mobility, processes of world-making, and the dialectical relationship between loss and wonder around which diasporic experiences turn’ (ibid.). The framework of khora in relation to migration ‘is rooted in relatedness, in kinship’ (ibid.); it is in and through kinship networks as well as social institutions such as dhukuti, community-based social welfare organizations (T. kyidug), and other forms of obligation to each other and to place, that people from Mustang are able not only to migrate but also to sustain these translocal connections, regardless of where one is physically located. These community-based systems of care and financial assistance are integral to how those from Mustang in NYC are making it through the pandemic, but also to how they have been able to envision a future in the form of the community building in Queens. Such translocal systems remain an enduring part of how and why Mustangis have viewed migration to NYC as a way for those both in America and in Nepal to thrive.

**MIGRATION ASSUMPTIONS AND STATES OF PRECARITY**

In moments of crisis (Bates-Eamer, 2019; Butler, 2004; Casas-Cortés, 2014; Chacko and Price, 2020; Paret and Gleeson, 2016; Stewart, 2012), kinship becomes even more important as community members rely on one another to navigate challenges and uncertainties. The financial and social costs of the pandemic have called into question many of the assumptions around which Mustangis have built translocal livelihood strategies. Doubts have been cast on ways of living and possible futures that once felt secure, as people turn to each other and to community-based support networks to survive. We use the term ‘precarity’ in this context to highlight the indeterminate, restrictive and fragmented circumstances translocal communities navigate over time, across scale and in different places. Levels of precarity among immigrant communities are influenced by micro and macro dynamics, ‘by fluctuating national regulations and policies, the vicissitudes of labour
markets, changes in nuances of popular discourse on migration and migrants as well as personal and social characteristics’ (Chacko and Price, 2020: 14). We view precarity not only in terms of economic insecurity but as an embodied experience of vulnerability marked by conditions that violate one’s sense of agency and well-being (Butler, 2004; Chu 2010; De León, 2015; Paret and Gleeson, 2016).

We thus position this article as both a sense-making process of the current moment and an ethnographically rooted analysis of how COVID-19 is being experienced in NYC and, secondarily, in Nepal. We examine how this moment is overturning many previously held notions about migration. We endeavour to imagine the long-term impacts that COVID-19 will have on the socio-economic well-being of communities such as those from Mustang who have come to rely heavily on labour migration and remittances, and we consider how translocal lives have been profoundly altered by increased levels of precarity and vulnerability.

**Assumption 1: In America, unlike Nepal, the ‘System’ is Reliable**

Mustangi people often remark that one of the fundamental elements that divides life in Nepal from life in America is that, in the US, ‘system chha’. Despite elements of hardship — structural inequalities, cultural expectations, stresses on family ties, financial burdens, linguistic barriers — Mustangis who have migrated have, on the whole, done well for themselves. However, after the outbreak of COVID-19, the ‘system’ that they had envisioned existed in NYC was exposed for its underlying vulnerabilities, forcing Mustangis to confront systemic inequality in America that they had previously downplayed or overlooked for many years. The following vignette, emergent from Tashi Gurung’s family experiences, illustrates the overturning of this assumption.

It is no coincidence that all of Kunga and Tamding’s children ended up in the US. They assumed that America offered their children a chance for a better education and economic advancement. Kunga and Tamding’s own lack of education, and awareness that village life offered limited opportunities, played a central role in their decision to encourage their children to migrate. Their reasoning is founded on a certain privileging of the ‘American Dream’ narrative but in ways that also assumed Nepal, and Mustang, would still be the primary locus of belonging and identity, even after migration. Wealth and opportunity sought in NYC would eventually circle back and help to ‘develop’ Mustang. Over time, this propensity to migrate has created a social stigma now attached to younger generations who do not leave — presumed to be ‘stuck’ in Nepal — or those who make conscious decisions to return to Nepal. This stigma has grown stronger over the past decade, creating a pressurized environment that assumes one should attempt to migrate to the US upon completing high school or even before.
The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken confidence in this attitude towards migration as a ‘life-stage’ rite of passage as well as an economic strategy. When Queens became the US epicentre of COVID-19, Mustangis in Nepal began to worry about family members in NYC. The sense of economic security that Mustangis in NYC had felt was halted: this security depended on NYC being its usual bustling global hub. When the city came to a standstill, and when the ‘system’ — particularly health and human services — was overwhelmed, many Mustangis felt their fundamental vulnerability for the first time. In some instances, people were called back to work in ‘essential’ jobs like healthcare and service industries, but chose not to go for fear of exposing their relatives to the virus, particularly since most live in crowded multi-generational households (Venugopal, 2020). Unemployment skyrocketed. People got sick and several from the community died. While they were able to rely on their own long-standing networks of community care, rotating credit systems and culturally Tibetan Buddhist practices to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic — often to very positive effect — they also felt abandoned, disillusioned and confused by the lack of clarity and support coming from state and local government, and expressed disbelief at the level of unpreparedness and consequent death and sickness that occurred in such unevenly distributed ways across the city.

Prior to COVID-19, Mustangis rarely acknowledged their vulnerability in the US — the presumed ‘land of opportunity’. Now, these narratives of stability and security have shifted. Many Mustangi women work as babysitters, caretakers, or house cleaners while men tend to work in hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, or for driving services like Uber. Within the family in question, four siblings and their spouses are all involved in such industries, while the two most educated siblings have ‘white collar’ employment, one as a schoolteacher and one as a graduate student. Amidst NYC lockdown, three of the four sisters were called out to work, in domestic settings, as their employers were forced to work from home. The sibling who is a babysitter was most concerned about returning to work because she recognized the unequal terrain of risk. The fact that the most educated among this family had the ‘luxury’ of working from home drew stark comparisons and created tensions within a family that was, still, working hard to take care of one another.

Prior to the pandemic, Mustangi people were not fully aware of state or federal unemployment benefits as they had not needed such assistance; they knew it existed in the abstract, as part of the ‘system’ that those with proper immigration documents could access, but this remained theoretical knowledge. The majority of the Mustangi community in NYC have trouble reading, writing and speaking proficiently in English, and many of them have never used a computer. Now this capacity to navigate ‘the system’ — not in the abstract but in specific terms — became a crucial element of their daily lives, leaving many anxious, helpless and insecure. Many did not have email addresses or the language skills necessary to apply for assistance. In this
family, the most educated siblings navigated unemployment bureaucracies and applications for other federal benefits for the rest of the family, and for many other people in the Mustang NYC community. Although the stimulus payments and unemployment benefits from the government brought some relief, Mustangis still had to pay their bills and feed their families, both in the US and Nepal, on much-reduced income.

These experiences of ‘system’ breakdown in America stood in stark contrast to the experiences that many Mustangis have had in other countries, at other moments of migration. For example, siblings Wangmo and Kunga first migrated to work in Japan before coming to the US. They had never questioned this decision, until now. They noticed that Japan has garnered significant praise for its handling of COVID-19, whereas the US has been widely criticized for its politicization of the pandemic and the ensuing lack of effectiveness in curbing the virus. ‘If we stayed in Japan’, Kunga said, ‘we would never have to fear for our lives. About 100,000 people have died in the US. How is the US the number one country?’.

Since then, the death toll from COVID-19 in the US has far surpassed half a million. As the realities of the US’s failed attempts to contain the spread of COVID-19 became apparent, worries over children’s education, future employment opportunities and healthcare access have become a central point of concern.

The vulnerabilities Mustangis and other immigrant communities face as a result of the pandemic reveal ‘how precarity stretches to embrace multiplicity, to go beyond the limits of workspace, and to rethink labor, citizenship, and care practices’ (Casas-Cortés, 2014: 223). COVID-19 has amplified the precarious nature of translocal lives — the contingent employment and social risks immigrant communities endure as they are forced to question their financial safety nets and dismantle the assumption that migration leads to economic security. The pandemic has also revealed to immigrant parents that ‘working hard’ is not enough to provide a better life for their children. Rather, it has heightened the social, linguistic and technological divides between generations and within families.

The case of Kunga and Tamding’s family reveals how broader political and economic shifts reconfigure relationships between individuals and communities across localities and, in doing so, reinforce many of the same insecurities that underpin migration decisions. This vignette also supports Sassen’s (1998: 56) claim that migrations ‘do not just happen; they are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combination of countries; they are patterned’. The ‘system chha’ narrative moved from an

4. Interview with Kunga (male, retired), NYC, 8 July 2020.
5. Although the primary driver for migration is economic, educational opportunities for younger generations are also cited as a rationale (Childs and Choedup, 2018). COVID-19 has also challenged these assumptions, with stark consequences for parents in NYC who are at once unequipped and yet find themselves responsible for helping their children in the adjustment to home schooling and distance learning.
abstract concept to lived, challenging and concrete in the wake of the pandemic. Now, Mustangis are learning to navigate through the US system by gaining basic tangible skills and knowledge that have the potential to allow them to tap into the very system they cite as a primary reason to migrate to NYC — but that they had never really relied upon previously. As Mustangis have discovered during the pandemic, however, this system is also complex, convoluted, sometimes inaccessible, and far from perfect, even as it can afford them new elements of stability beyond what is maintained through translocal community networks. Mustangi communities in Nepal and abroad, as well as other immigrant communities, are left to question the conditions upon which their translocal lives are built, and to consider the possibility that living in the US is not a prerequisite for stability.

Assumption 2: Remittances are Reliable and Make Life Better for those in Nepal

The importance of migration and mobility among the communities of Mustang dates back centuries, with opportunities in tourism and international labour migration as contemporary iterations of old patterns. The introduction of a cash economy and a decreasing reliance on traditional forms of livelihoods mean that the majority of Mustang’s households now depend on the influx of money from tourism and remittances — as is the case for many others in Nepal (Baniya et al., 2020; Sijapati and Limbu, 2012). New economic alliances and responsibilities in relation to remittances emerge alongside changing social structures in Mustang and within Mustang’s diasporic communities that transform kinship networks, local forms of governance and community well-being. Moreover, the reliance on the remittance economy as a fundamental part of Mustangi livelihoods is rooted in the possibilities that translocal mobility offers. We return to another aspect of the lives in this one Mustangi family to reveal the complicated decision-making processes around migration, and the ways in which many families now face even greater financial vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kunga and Tamding live a comfortable life in their Kathmandu home, but not everyone can afford to live in Nepal’s capital where the cost of living is high and has increased exponentially in recent years. Just two decades ago, few Mustangi owned houses in Kathmandu. Since that time, a growing number have purchased houses there, with funds earned abroad. As the number of Mustangi migrants to NYC increased, the number of houses owned by those in Kathmandu also increased. Before Mustangis migrated to NYC, few could even afford the luxury of seasonal migration to southern Nepal or parts of northern India to escape Mustang’s brutally cold winters. Today, elderly Mustangi, like Kunga and Tamding, whose children are abroad, either live in Pokhara and Kathmandu or split their time between Mustang and urban Nepal.
It is common to see congregations of elderly Mustangis circumambulating the holy Buddhist stupas of Boudhanath and Swayambhu in Kathmandu each morning and evening. Like many of their friends, Kunga and Tamding subscribe to this daily ritual of prayer, taking advantage of their old age and freedom from the responsibilities of village life. Most of the time, they consider themselves fortunate to have all of their children in the US. Even though their children are not physically present, they have hired local caretakers. In addition, the children send money for personal expenses and allowances for pilgrimage trips, raise money for the restoration of monasteries (Craig, 2004), help villages affected by natural disasters, aid in the construction of new community spaces and schools, and provide other emergency financial support. In 2003, Tamding was diagnosed with early-stage pancreatic cancer. She was airlifted by helicopter and taken to a private hospital in Kathmandu for treatment where she was told by doctors that she would not live more than six months. Now, 17 years later, Tamding still lives a fairly healthy life. She attributes her second chance at life to America — to the remittances from NYC that made her expensive medical treatment in Nepal possible.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become exceedingly difficult to send money back to Nepal (Akram and Galizia, 2020). This is due to loss of employment among those in NYC as well as a sense that they need to save in order to economically survive the pandemic, but it is also a logistical concern. Remittances are most often sent in the physical hands of Mustangis who are travelling to Nepal as opposed to formal bank transfers that tend to be costly and unreliable, at least on the Nepal side. There has never been a shortage of people with whom to send money or goods back home: people circle through. But the pandemic changed all that.

During a WeChat group call in mid-March with Kunga and Tamding, the children were discussing if they should send money and, if so, how. With the worldwide travel restrictions, no one was travelling to Nepal. Instead, people have resorted to money transferring agencies, but with the majority of businesses closed, this is not reliable (Gill, 2020). Lhakpa, one of the only family members to remain employed during the pandemic, was able to send money via bank transfer to Nepal in March 2020. However, Kunga and Tamding were not able to receive the money until June when the Government of Nepal started easing lockdown. In times like these, the burdens of translocal kinship networks become stark.

This vignette shows how precarity exists in spaces of both production and reproduction (Gidwani and Ramanmuthy, 2018), in both ‘receiving’ sites of migration and the ‘home’ regions of migrants. Translocal livelihood strategies rely on ‘invisible economies of care’ (Shah and Lerche, 2020) whereby migrants abroad are responsible to their kin back home who, in turn,

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6. As recently as March 2020, the Mustang community in NYC raised money for anticipated COVID-related relief back in Mustang.
provide a safety net by maintaining the household, looking after children, and tending to the agricultural fields and livestock. COVID-19 has shown how translocal kinship networks in and between Mustang and NYC, and the economies of care that sustain them, are stretched thin. Previously held configurations of such care practices are temporarily disrupted and have been undermined for the foreseeable future as new economic and social vulnerabilities expose the fragmented and risky nature of migration. The story of Kunga and Tamding’s family reaffirms how ‘precarity is experienced at the intimate scale of the human body but also it is influenced by policies determined by the nation-state or supra-national entities’ (Chacko and Price, 2020: 3). Practices of caring for elderly members of the family, like Tamding’s cancer treatment, or funding infrastructure projects, like the building of schools in Mustang, intersect with national policies and labour markets that dictate the availability of foreign employment and economic transfers. As the effects of COVID-19 continue to disproportionately affect immigrant and other marginalized communities, the production and reproduction of translocal livelihoods and the kin relations at their core become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Assumption 3: Investing in Mustang Tourism is Profitable

As we have shown, remittances serve as an important mechanism of survival for translocal Mustangi families and remain a vital part of development and economic growth for those who remain in Nepal. Likewise, the advent of a robust tourism industry in Mustang in the early 1990s created new opportunities, with many households constructing guest houses and restaurants to cater to the growing number of tourists. The number of hotels and other tourism-oriented businesses in Mustang has increased steadily over the past few decades. Before 2000, the large settlement of Lo Monthang had only two hotels; by 2019, that number had risen above 30. Although this tourism sector development is not solely due to remittances, according to first author Tashi Gurung’s survey data from 2019, well over half of tourism-related businesses are created and sustained with remittances. The following vignette examines the shift from agriculture and animal husbandry to tourism as a perceivably less risky and more lucrative economic investment, inclusive of the complex familial negotiations that factor into decisions over the household division of labour between Nepal and NYC. Before Kunga and Tamding’s children migrated to the US, they subsisted on farming, animal husbandry and trade, as did most families in Mustang.

7. The exception to this being heightened periods of political tension during Nepal’s decade-long Maoist conflict (1996–2006) and the 2015 earthquakes which devastated Nepal’s infrastructure and claimed over 9,000 lives. These events curtailed tourism during these years.
8. Further details are available upon request from the corresponding author.
During the farming season, Kunga and Tamding worked long days in the fields, and in winter Kunga used to travel to Mustang’s northern border with Tibet (China) to trade livestock (mostly sheep and yak) for lumber, furniture, furs and other goods. Kunga is one of those Loba men whom Murton (2019: 33) refers to, who frequently travelled between Tibet and Mustang for petty trade. Although Kunga still engages in such trade in a limited manner, the border is geopolitically sensitive and such economic activity has become unreliable. Beginning in the 1960s, this trans-Himalayan border region became increasingly militarized after China’s occupation of Tibet, making it more difficult to sustain previous patterns of transhumance and economic exchange. This was exacerbated in the 1960s and 1970s by the presence of Tibetan resistance soldiers in Mustang, and again in the winter of 1999–2000, when the Karmapa, a high-profile figure in Tibetan Buddhism, fled Tibet into exile in India by travelling through Mustang (for details see Cowan, 2016; McGranahan, 2010). After Tamding was diagnosed with cancer and moved to Kathmandu, it became impossible for Kunga to continue working the land and caring for the village house alone. Despite his children’s constant requests to retire, Kunga, like many elderly Mustangis, did not have other plausible means of earning income except through tourism.

In the summer of 2013, Kunga expressed his desire to open a hotel. ‘Everyone is building a hotel’, he explained. ‘My cousins are building hotels. They seem to be doing very well. We have a good plot of land for building a hotel as we do not farm there anymore’.9 Owning a hotel had become an attractive idea in part because it is seen as a sign of prestige, progress and wealth. It is rare to encounter a family that owns a hotel in Mustang which does not have at least one family member abroad. Before COVID-19, investments in tourism-related businesses were considered low risk, in that they did not require an extensive educational background or a hefty amount of start-up capital; some cash and land, such as a fallow field, was sufficient. Using remittances to invest in the tourism industry has been deemed safe, and something that is attractive to older and younger generations alike. Particularly for younger migrants, many of whom did not grow up in Mustang, tourism is seen as a profession they can invest in now and could delve into if they returned.

In the wake of the pandemic, tourism has suffered the steepest drop since the 1960s when Nepal first began opening its borders to foreign tourists (Prasain, 2020). The pandemic and associated lockdown have restricted international travel and prevented the movement of people within Nepal during peak tourist seasons. COVID-19 has exposed the uncertainty of the tourism industry in a much more convincing way than the Nepal earthquakes of 2015 (Le Billon et al., 2020) when tourism bounced back quickly. The pandemic has made Mustangi communities come to terms with tourism’s precarity,

9. Phone interview, Kunga Dhakpa, Kathmandu, 13 July 2020.
linked as it is to a reliance on remittances and cyclical migratory flows, on the one hand, as well as the capacity for foreign and domestic travel, on the other. This vignette also draws attention to the simultaneity of translocal communities (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) in a way that highlights the important roles of both migrants and non-migrants; labour abroad funds projects in Nepal which, in turn, help to ensure migrant families maintain a safety net back home (Shah and Lerche, 2020). Investing in tourism-oriented businesses is likely to decrease while navigating the twin crises of the pandemic and its economic fallout. As future opportunities in the tourism industry in Nepal diminish concurrently with earning opportunities abroad, the assumption that translocal migration offers a pathway to a more secure future back in Nepal, particularly through tourism, is marked by insecurity and unpredictability.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have elaborated on the nature of migration, mobility and precarity among a global translocal Himalayan community in the context of unprecedented levels of financial and social upheaval being experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic. These stories illuminate the ways this crisis has disproportionately affected the lives of marginalized immigrant communities of colour in places like NYC — people whose jobs are often considered ‘essential’ and those whose families elsewhere depend on the continued investment of remittances for their survival. For many Mustangis, these burdens have caused them to re-evaluate the assumptions on which their decisions to migrate rested. From the assumption that America would always offer better and more stable economic opportunities than Nepal, to the notion that the US presents a reliable social safety net — a ‘system’ — that is unavailable in Nepal, many preconceptions have been called into question as a result of the global health crisis. As tourism has come to a standstill in Nepal, the aspirational idea that youth in NYC can return to Nepal after accumulating enough capital now hangs in the balance as they struggle to support their families in the US, let alone send money back to Nepal.

Our focus on translocal migration and precarity in the context of COVID-19 highlights the undue pressure immigrant communities, like those from Mustang, endure in moments of crisis. The case of Kunga and Tamding’s family from Mustang is just one intimate example of precarity in the context of a translocal community whose lives are built around a shared sense of belonging and economies of long-distance care. Previously existing and enduring forms of community-based loan systems (N. *dhukuti*) and welfare organizations (T. *kyidug*) emerged as even more vital, given the ways the pandemic overburdened national healthcare and financial systems. Although precarity is not a fixed status, with migrant communities facing varying
levels of such insecurity through space and over time, COVID-19 has provided a unique moment to unpack what it means to belong to a transnational kinship network at a time of immense physical risk and economic and social unrest. The examples from Mustang uniquely illustrate how one small immigrant community has successfully integrated its own systems of translocal care while also tapping into systems in the US to sustain lives before, and during, the pandemic.

Future generations of Mustangis will, nonetheless, need to face the cultural, political and economic repercussions of rapid depopulation from their ancestral homeland, and confront how the flows of people, goods and ideas have altered life in Mustang. Moreover, those living in NYC will continue to navigate shifting cultural and political contexts while renegotiating what it means to be Mustangi New Yorkers, as what constitutes ‘system chha/chhaina’ changes across time and generations. The ethnographic narratives presented in this article, coupled with a theoretical engagement with translocality, belonging and precarity in the context of migration, show that despite spatially dispersed kinship arrangements, the collective sentiment of a shared identity and responsibility to community remain strong. It is precisely within and through these dense kinship relations — relations which ‘give meaning to people’s lives in accordance with, or even in spite of, their physical and political abilities to move’ (Craig, 2020: 14) — that the importance of these networks is revealed, even as they are challenged and reconfigured in the face of COVID. What remains to be seen is how the forced physical stalling of these translocal lives may once again reshape assumptions about what it means to stay, to leave, or to return home.

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