— Chapter 5 —

# Construction, Labor, and Luxury in Kathmandu's Post-conflict Tourism Economy

*Dan Hirslund*

Barring the debilitating effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the travel industry worldwide, tourism has been on a steady growth path over the past thirty years, whether measured in travelers or economic output, trailing the successes of the globalization of capital.[1] At the same time, a slow but significant shift is underway in travel markets from the dominance of Europe and North America towards Asian countries,[2] reflecting the region's deliberate, if variegated, liberalization of markets, and a simultaneous sharp growth in middle classes that have historically been the drivers of mass tourism. Tourism, as I analyze it here, is on the one hand a result of global shifts in capitalist power configurations, particularly along an East–West axis, while on the other hand it is itself a driver of disruptions and expansions in specific regions. Tourism has therefore become a specific frontline in the expansion of capital, a targeted search to realize value, and the work it does on the ground is 'insidious'; it inserts itself in the messy life of concrete sociopolitical formations with the aim of spotting 'good opportunities,' and soon finds itself entangled in existing struggles over value that it must both navigate and confront. In the most immediate sense, then, this reorientation of global tourism—towards Asia and middle-class sentiments—signals a change in the markets and products of the industry that results in the creation of new zones of intervention, new frontlines of value, that are spatial as well as social.

In this chapter, I focus on the pressures and counterpressures around labor issues that result from this new tourism frontline in the Himalayas. Specifically, I trace the work that luxury tourism, and in particular the construction of high-end hotels, does in propagating a new regime of value in Nepal's capital Kathmandu, where I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork on labor and construction since 2015, and on tourism and hospitality since 2018.[3] Nepal's tourist industry has been undergoing rapid changes since two devastating earthquakes in April and May 2015 created havoc in the real-estate market. This produced enabling conditions for a new class of investors to enter the sector, while transitions in the global geography of tourism also prompted both a rise in the number of arrivals from the Western to the Eastern hemisphere, and a shift in their nationalities.[4] Nevertheless, Nepal's tourism industry remains miniscule in comparison with that of other smaller South Asian nations, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, whose economies are closely bound to the 'global tourism system' (Cornelissen 2005; Crick 1994). But similar to these—and unlike Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bhutan (Richter 1989; Schroeder 2017)—Nepal has, since its official 'opening' to foreign influences in 1950, been adopting a liberal tourist policy and allowed international demand to drive the national development of tourism spaces. In contrast, however, to the 'sun, sand, and sex' tourism that has characterized tropical resort development in coastal pockets around the globe, including in South and Southeast Asia,[5] Himalayan tourism has historically been less spectacular and less resource-intensive, and therefore not as lucrative for national and foreign investors. This is now changing.

Viewed from the perspective of a value regime, tourism in Nepal has been uneven in its growth, geographically scattered, sectorally divided between very different types of tourism, informally organized, and—importantly—with only limited involvement from the nation's ruling classes, except for a few property-driven downtown venues. As also noted for India by Linda Richter, tourism in South Asia is profoundly interregional, as long histories of pilgrimage to Buddhist and Hindu sites connect Nepal with India and Sri Lanka (respectively accounting for 21.2 and 4.6 percent of international arrivals in 2019).[6] This has allowed for a considerable domestic tourism industry—though more so for India than Nepal, where travel is more expensive due to the mountainous terrain—and, crucially, the development of a dispersed and local hospitality and travel sector with few dominant economic or political actors. Unlike tourism development in most countries where research has been conducted, the Nepalese state has not been very active in promoting or supporting the industry; there have not been strong business interests in dominating the market, or much interest from global corporations in investing in the industry.

Nepal's integration into the global tourism industry therefore poses something of a conundrum. On the one hand, tourist arrivals are rising—and quite significantly too, even if the total number only surpassed 1 million in 2018—with Chinese visitors now accounting for 14 percent (up from 6.3 percent a decade earlier), and visitors from Myanmar, Thailand, South Korea, and Malaysia beginning to rival some of the former dominant Western powers such as the UK, US, and Germany. On the other hand, very limited development of the tourism industry has taken place to reflect the growth and changing composition of arrivals. The Nepal Tourism Board—the state's major tourism institution—still promotes the country as a backpacker destination, and references its 'natural beauty,' including 'Nepali smiles' and cultural hospitality, as its major assets. These themes, which hinge on a particular nationalist narrative (Bhandari 2019), have been recycled *ad nauseam* since the development of the first national tourism policy in the early 1970s, and hide more fundamental shifts in the nation's tourism economy.

It is in this space of indeterminacy for the tourist value regime that I locate my problematic. With a geopolitical shift toward the East, which has helped stabilize Nepal's post-conflict and post-disaster government, a new class of entrepreneurial businesses has begun to invest fiercely in a luxury tourism market that hardly exists: the narrow segment of four– and five-star hotel accommodation. In comparative terms, this is an interesting development. Luxury hotel construction has historically taken place where there is already a strong state presence that will guarantee supporting infrastructure and the security of investments, such as around resorts (Adler and Adler 2004), heritage sites (Hazbun 2008), and urban regeneration (Amore 2019). This is unsurprising given that building high-profile hotels is both an expensive and a long-term commitment. A more common scenario in the mixed-liberal regimes of Asia compared to the Euro-American market is one where the state is actively involved in financing (or even owning and running) hotels, such as happened under Marco's corrupt and dictatorial regime in the Philippines, or, in a much more sustainable (but also less 'luxurious') manner, in postcolonial and pre-liberalized India (Richter 1989). Yet Nepal today fits neither of these trajectories, with a political elite much too weak to dominate, let alone finance, expensive tourist accommodation, and

**Figure 5.1.** Construction site for a luxury hotel in Kathmandu.
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a recently federalized state that is frantically trying to catch up to its comprehensive development goals across the multiple schisms of national space to prevent further regional conflicts from destabilizing the polity.

## Luxury Tourism

The very recent emergence of this high-profile economic sector in Nepal therefore arrives, as it were, on its own, in relative isolation from state policy,[7] and, possibly more surprisingly, despite a convincing market for these new facilities. With average tourist spending in Nepal around US$40 per day, the scope for selling above-US$100 room-nights seems limited. Yet, it is precisely the hope of capturing a share of this small but lucrative market that attracts new investors and pits them against each other through an economy of anticipation. Between 2004 and 2012, the total number of star-hotels in the country had fallen (from 110 to 107) and by 2015 there were still only 116. Between 2015 and 2019, however, 22 new hotels were built, mostly in the upper segment of the spectrum, and another handful are under construction in Kathmandu alone. The 2015 earthquakes flattened or destroyed many tall buildings in the valley, and created an understandable concern regarding high-risers that had just begun to become popular by aspiring middle classes prior to the disaster. The sudden interest from investors in constructing outsized high-risers in a city where the tradition had been to build three-floor residences adds to the mythologization of these new monuments to modernity, and it has generalized an appetite for a growing tourist economy. Newspapers now offer routine updates on how 'tourism' is doing, and publish the latest figures for international arrivals. Notwithstanding what critical scholars might think of capital-intensive urban enclave-development, the new hotel projects are immensely popular in Kathmandu, as they are seen to be boosting the local economy as well as bringing a modernizing appeal to the city.

It is clear here that real-estate-driven luxury tourism in Nepal is a value regime in the dialectical sense outlined by Don Kalb in the Introduction as a multiscalar but historically specific field of new agents and old and new values. The driver of Kathmandu's posh urbanity, with which the tourism frontline seeks to ally, is the rise of a new cosmopolitan middle class, itself a product of the polity's extreme centralization, which has guaranteed comfortable high-caste affluence in this shielded Himalayan valley, despite extreme poverty in the rest of the country. Originally composed of three small valley kingdoms, each with compact urban 'Durbar' centers surrounded by lush agricultural fields, Kathmandu has over the past decades witnessed a sprawling urbanization that has turned many indigenous Newari landowners into wealthy landlords. New elites have prospered in the nexuses between growing development aid and trade liberalization, while the conspicuous growth of the valley's population has increased social stratification as migrants escaping conflict violence and rural poverty have flocked into urban fringes. Alarming levels of pollution are compounding social divisions, as affluent citizens escape filth, traffic congestion, and poverty by moving to higher ground and away from the dense, and increasingly dysfunctional, downtown areas. The Bagmati River, Kathmandu's major water source, is contaminated by stinking sewage and trails this new spatial division as it winds its way through the city's low-lying areas, engulfing its unfortunate inhabitants with its repulsive odors. The new high-rise luxury construction thrives on this spatial, even olfactory, division, as it employs airtight, soundproof, and elevated experiences of historic neighborhoods far above the travails of the everyday. One vector of tourism's value regime consists of this very precise encapsulation of historic 'value'—experiencing the Durbar squares of past kingdoms—within a contemporary capitalist technology: the protective shield of luxury accommodation. Luxury itself is a dialectical outcome of this contrast, which capital momentarily brings together.

Luxury tourism, however, does not only operate on the scale of the tourist experience. It is also deeply entwined in the politics of infrastructure development. While tourism has historically been on the peripheries of landscapes of accumulation in Nepal, the growth of a nascent industry around luxury accommodation articulates with, and benefits from, the state's geopolitical strategies.

Nepal's post-conflict and post-disaster governments have looked to regional reconfigurations of travel and wealth to transcend its historical dependency on India's travel market, most directly through investing in the building of the new Gautam Buddha international airport, which can serve as a regional hub. As Daniel Mains (2019) has shown for Ethiopia, fragile regimes faced with the prospects of failed modernization double down on infrastructure construction both as a signal of modernity and as a concrete strategy to increase regional integration. These links between what Mains considers a paradigmatic tension of 'developmental states' and their production of spaces 'under construction' are relevant for considering Nepal's development compact as well, which has become caught in an accelerated infrastructural expansionist fantasy that articulates new donor concerns with expanding the market state across the rugged Himalayan terrain, and the hype of the Smart Cities program that has accompanied India's BJP leader Narendra Modi's rise to power (Kaur 2020). Kathmandu is deeply integrated into these unfolding contours of contemporary global urbanization as a 'backward' mountain valley city seeking to emulate the successes of other global metropoles. Today's boom in hotel construction, however, is privately funded by leading national industrialists, and with very little, if any, direct foreign investment, thus raising important questions about how such infrastructural projects articulate national political priorities or change regional economic integration. It is to probe the precise linkages between states and global actors in promoting tourism development that I attend to the politics of construction. Because of its dependence on expensive materiality that needs to be sourced from a large network of local and international providers, and its reliance on large quantities of labor with very different levels of expertise and deeply divergent mobilities, construction offers a privileged prism for investigating the value struggles of development regimes.

To trace this nexus between luxury tourism and construction, I offer an analysis of the regimes of labor through which Nepal's frontlines of tourism is being waged. The anthropology of labor has recently enjoyed a resurgence (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014), showing the relevance of detailed case studies to review important shifts in capitalist globalization. Here I approach the problematic of luxury accommodation from multiple vantage points to bring out the continuities and discontinuities of labor's composition within the overall accumulation of the hospitality industry. The regime of labor perspective in this chapter can thus be seen as a concretization of the wider regime of value in which tourism is inserted, and through which it realizes itself as a 'politics of operations' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). This requires transcending analytical niches that are usually kept separate, in particular the distinction between construction labor, which is generally understood under the rubric of 'production,' and hotel labor, which is seen to fall under 'services.' But these two groups of laborers—which are divided by social status and the nature of their labor—are in fact employed by the one and same capitalist on the same infrastructural project, and they fill complementary roles at opposite ends of the life of new hotels: the first group as builders and the second as service staff. While labor processes differ markedly from construction to the running of tourist facilities, these two are intimately connected from a value perspective because they form part of the same capital and merely express different moments in the production process. To offer a balanced evaluation of how Nepal's tourism economy is being transformed by investments in luxury properties, it seems advantageous to bring these two different moments of accumulation into the same analytical frame. I start with an analysis of how luxury construction requires a shift in expertise, also an expression of labor, before moving on to show what kinds of labor politics these new configurations unleash.

## Engineering Luxury

In the middle of one of Kathmandu's congested neighborhoods lies Ghandaki,[8] one of the city's premier historical hotels, which since its opening in the 1970s has provided a tranquil respite in 'traditional' surroundings for upper-class Nepalese visitors who can afford to spend the US$250 price tag per night. The hotel promotes a laid-back and indeed deliberately 'anti-modern' atmosphere based on artful decoration and slow but deeply personalized service. But when I met the owner over a cup of tea in July 2019 in the hotel's stylish courtyard, he explained to me that they must also rethink what experience they offer in comparison with newer deluxe hotels. Although the current premises are set in sumptuous surroundings, Ghandaki cannot, for instance, offer comparable amenities for vehicles, thus forcing customers to commute by taxi or accept parking their cars in crowded entrance areas, if at all. This has become an issue in a city where upmarket hotels derive a significant portion of their revenues from restaurant services to locals, and where there are few alternative parking options.[9] Nepal's post-conflict period has seen a conspicuous rise in the private ownership of expensive vehicles as a consequence of aspiring middle-classes relocating to suburban neighborhoods, and this has had a visible effect on links between cars and class.[10] Insufficient parking in city centers has forced hotels catering to this important class segment to give more consideration to proper parking facilities, and to develop these in tandem with other upgrades to their services when planning the architecture of hotel compounds.

The changing conditions of Kathmandu's hotel industry cannot be adequately understood without considering shifts in the market for land in recent times. Nepal's urbanization drive happened quite late compared to other South Asian metropoles; first because the country was never directly integrated into the British colonial infrastructure, and secondly because its national modernization only took off in the 1960s and was for a long time centered on rural rather than urban reform. Kathmandu started growing markedly in the 1990s with economic and political liberalization, as expanding industries brought new migrant populations to the city, and flows of international aid created jobs for educated middle classes. While the political conflict with the Maoists (1996–2006) dampened economic expansion and led to setbacks for GDP growth and tourism alike in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the mostly rural violence nonetheless created a push to urban areas. This meant there was a steady inflow of settlers, particularly from neighboring mountain communities, and a pressure to convert agricultural land into peri-urban zones. Since the 2007 peace agreement that brought an end to the Maoist war, real estate prices have been growing rapidly and have led to further suburbanization and escalating downtown prices, which now match some of the most expensive areas in Mumbai and Delhi. Even during recent crises—the 2015 earthquakes and the 2020 global pandemic—core areas of the city have seen price hikes of between 5 and 10 percent in just six months. The reason for this largely uninterrupted growth, one real estate developer explained to me, is that less and less of the valleys' limited land mass is coming onto the market.[11] It has therefore become increasingly difficult to acquire land for redevelopment purposes, and this scarcity of land in turn puts enormous pressure on hotel investors—for whom location is key—to design efficient revenue-generating buildings.

As part of the Ghandaki hotel's drive to remain competitive with changes to the tourism sector, they signed a contract with the renowned construction company Sagarmatha Inc in 2018 to build an annex to their existing heritage-style compound. One of the significant changes to have emerged in the field of construction in recent years is a willingness to engage with the challenge of digging deeper into the ground and constructing full basements. While Ghandaki's new building design includes novel elements such as an interior courtyard and a presidential suite with its own indoor pool, the most expensive and complicated element is in fact the double-basement structure, which extends 15 meters into the ground and is projected to take almost a year to build. I have been following the gradual completion of this critical foundation, first on the site and later back in Denmark via regular updates. Unlike the myriad single-residence construction projects that dominate the building boom in Kathmandu, and which I have been observing for several years, the building of Ghandaki's annex requires a different level of expertise than the predominant and much smaller construction projects in the valley. One important reason for this is that the geological conditions of the Himalayan region offer a significant challenge to construction technologies due to the nature of alluvial deposits based on millennia of sediments. Digging underground in what is in effect the bottom of a dried-up lake is consequently fraught with danger, because the 'sand'—as engineers call it—is prone to sliding and to thus pulling down adjacent buildings. Stories of collapsing outer walls in connection with digging are common, and have proliferated in the post-earthquake reconstruction rush.

The building of Ghandaki's second hotel structure was dominated from the outset by engineering experts. Upon receiving the contract, Sagarmatha Inc disputed the original design and managed to convince the owner that a more solid foundation was needed, even if this added time and money to the project. Sagarmatha's project team consisted almost entirely of structural engineers and they set up office on the top floor of an adjacent building, where its walls soon became plastered with elaborate Gantt Charts, technical drawings, and test results from ongoing measurements of concrete mixes and soil conditions. Before any excavation could be started, eight benchmarks around the perimeter were constructed (long iron rods dug into the ground, and leveled), which would serve as reference points

**Figure 5.2.** Construction of a luxury hotel in Kathmandu. © Dan Hirslund

for routine measurements of the stability of the ground and the outer walls. All technical drawings were done on industry-standard software packages (AutoCAD), and junior engineers were measuring the thickness of slabs and the distance between rebars, and testing the concrete with each new casting to feed these data into elaborate reports on each step of construction. There was nothing mysterious about this level of detailed expertise—it followed textbook formulas for engineering knowledge, and is testimony to the universalization of engineering epistemology in the global construction industry. But in the context of Nepal's construction sector, this is an exemplary building process that has only very recently begun to characterize urban construction, and where the luxury hotel sector is leading the way.

The construction industry in Nepal dates from the 1970s when ambitious national targets for road, bridge, and airport construction gave rise to a specialized sector for what was primarily enterprises for assembling labor and materials with very limited investment in machinery. The sector grew over the next decades, buoyed up by infrastructural development aid and a controversial liberalized system for bidding on government contracts, which saw small national contractors partnering up with international companies for large prestigious projects that required external expertise, capital, and machinery but that kept local resources fragmented and underdeveloped. Relative to other economic sectors, however, the construction industry in Nepal is relatively powerful with a strong lobbying organization (FCAN—Federation of Contractors' Associations of Nepal). The post-conflict context with its renewed focus on infrastructural development, and the post-earthquake reconstruction boom, which consolidated reinforced concrete (RC) technology as the 'earthquake-safe' option and rushed out graduates with diplomas in structural engineering—until recently a very marginal subfield in the curriculum—has only added to the status of engineering expertise in the construction process. During the project at Ghandaki, Sagarmatha's team had several confrontations with the entrepreneur company whose expertise was in architecture. But on both occasions that I am acquainted with, the latter eventually had to withdraw their suggestions for changes to the contract as Sagarmatha's engineers, with their meticulous documentation and strong scientific grounding in safety standards, were able to win the argument once Ghandaki's owner had been called in for arbitration. The role of engineers in Kathmandu's construction industry has traditionally been limited to a control function, while the actual expertise has resided with experienced contractors. This arrangement has been possible because of the limited height of buildings in the valley (3–4 stories), the absence of basements, and the low cost of construction compared to the value of land. But this calculus is no longer operative for the new generation of hotels.

The manifestation of engineering expertise in construction is a frontline in the development of luxury tourism. The entire field for investing in and building deluxe hotels has shifted to smaller plots of land and a higher demand for 'international' standards with the recent spread of global hotel brands in the city and an increasingly cosmopolitan local middle class, which reflects sentiments from gentrified metropoles in South Asia and beyond. From the lush external surroundings and 'horizontal' layout of the city's older luxury establishments—Gokarna, Hyatt, Soaltee, Annapurna, Shangri-La, Malla, Yak & Yeti—the new luxuries are being defined by indoor amenities and the superiority of verticality, with its spectacular views and impeccable construction that offer sealed interiors, high-speed elevators, and floor-to-ceiling windows—and underground parking, of course. This is the world of the Marriott, Vivanta, and Aloft, and the under-construction Hyatt Place, Hilton, Holiday Inn, and Sheraton. Their construction costs are probably the most expensive single investments ever undertaken by private industry in the country, and this in turn increases their dependence on standardized expertise, as creditors and partners demand an audited knowledge regime by way of security for participation. In effect, this is what building projects stabilize—an extended, coherent, and feasible plan of implementation that can guarantee promised returns on investments. Engineers, under current conditions of construction, can deliver this epistemological security, and they thereby push the world of building construction into new registers of authority and power that come to redefine relations between capital and labor. There is thus a very concrete way by which 'the law of value,' Marx's formulation for the tendency of the profit motive (see Introduction) to trump alternative rationales, pushes a restructuring of value chains in the construction industry by putting the class of engineers and a particular domain of 'scientific' knowledge in charge of the production of infrastructure, thereby sidelining previously dominant values and their class representatives. This struggle, however, is primarily one between different elites, and thus takes the form of rivalry. But it creates push-down effects for the world of labor, where actual value must be constructed.

## Deepening Traditional Hierarchies

Labor organization in Nepal is comparable to many other 'semi-feudal' contexts, where centuries of feudal state–society relations have stabilized exploitative but quite 'functional' working relations, despite the growth of a bureaucratic and formally rational-legal state apparatus. Unsurprisingly, this tendency is strongly prevalent in the agricultural sector (Sugden 2013), but it also penetrates the construction sector, despite its more modern and urban pretensions. Sarah Swider, reporting on the recent expansion of construction in China, has found that the bulk mobilization of workers takes place through numerous informal channels that control rural–urban migrations, contracts, wages, and even punishments in what she calls distinct "employment configurations" (Swider 2015). She argues, very forcefully, that these mechanisms for regulating industrial relationships show that despite the informal character of construction labor, it remains heavily regulated beyond the law, and that we need to pay attention to the larger labor regimes wherein informal labor occupies a central role. Studies from other countries and continents corroborate these findings (Bosch and Philips 2003; Mains 2019; Van der Loop 1996) and suggest that there might be unique links between construction and informality that penetrate even highly regulated labor markets and strong governmental oversight. This can be important to keep in mind when evaluating construction's 'resistance' to formalization that I narrate in this section.

Nepal's construction sector has only been selectively formalized with the establishment of factories for cement and later steel production in the southern 'Terai' belt, where there is close access to raw materials from India. Unlike in China, on-site construction labor has historically never been institutionally organized. Instead, following on from the tributary labor that the Rana dynasty (1846–1951) forced upon its subject populations (Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999), the post-Rana modernizing state that emerged with the crumbling of the British Empire continued the village-level organization of labor-gangs for most of its construction needs. These gangs of fifty to eighty workers organized under one *naike* (gang leader) developed with the road-building craze of the 1970s, and quickly became the favorite method for mobilizing sundry labor from dispersed mountain populations because it outsourced problems of recruitment to specialized contractors: as one influential study from that period reported, "contractors are basically men with wide networks of contracts capable of arranging the movement of large numbers of laborers with minimum material incentives" (Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron 1979: 133). Similar "employment configurations" have been reported from elsewhere (Sargent 2017; Troccoli 2019), including in Swider's study from China where she refers to this model as "mediated employment," and the defining characteristic seems to be construction's need for, and ability to suck up, miscellaneous groups of dispossessed workers from low-paying peripheries.

The dominance of mediated employment in construction is thus an indicator of the spatial dislocation between sites of production and sites of reproduction, which drives migrant populations into its orbits of accumulation, and which establishes a functioning 'regime of value.'[12] The first labor law to appear in Nepal in 1992 followed from the post-1990 state's liberalization efforts, and it categorically exempted businesses with fewer than ten employees from regulation, thus creating incentives for a further fragmentation of labor through expanded subcontracting systems—not just in construction but also in others sectors, such as garments, that provided low-skilled employment for migrating populations from underdeveloped rural regions (Graner 2009; O'Neill 2004). In Kathmandu, this disjuncture is furthered by expensive livelihood costs in an overpopulated valley. Consequently, construction workers generally live on actual construction sites, rather than in urban slums (as these have not developed significantly in Kathmandu), and move around with the progression of the building. Contractors, in turn, navigate the needs of site managers on different building projects, and shift their workers around to accomplish specific tasks, as most labor gangs are specialized in particular niches of construction—slab construction, iron bending, formworks, and so on. The result is that labor and living conditions for most construction workers remain opaque to the construction companies, who rely on a large network of gang leaders to handle employment issues and organize work.

Like elsewhere, labor segmentation is thus also an elementary component of Nepal's construction sector. But the contradiction has been sharpened by the complex infrastructure projects connected with tourism expansion due to a more pronounced hierarchy on building sites. In the Ghandaki hotel expansion project, for instance, a full on-site management office had been erected where the chief engineer, site supervisor, and junior engineers could steer the construction process through the long working days, which generally lasted from 7 a.m. to sunset. While these white-helmet supervisors were directly employed by Sagarmatha and thus enjoyed complimentary lunches in the hotel's canteen, the yellow-helmet construction workers remained subject to terms imposed by mediating labor contractors, and were forced to hire their own cook to prepare meals in the interstitial spaces they had set up on the construction site. With sparse living quarters and nowhere to go and spend their free time, laborers ended up working long hours according to the rhythms of construction, thus making up for their meager hourly wages by relinquishing leisure time.

There is little indication that these hierarchies of labor have increased industrial conflicts, despite the otherwise militant history of unions in Nepal (Hoffmann 2013), which is perhaps a reflection of an individualized culture of competition that disperses tensions and thwarts collective action (Hirslund 2021). In fact, what surprised me most about this labor arrangement—of large pools of contracted migrant laborers living on-site with all employment issues settled by a middleman—was how little had ostensibly changed from the 'feudalized' gang-labor system of the 1970s, as described by Seddon et al. (1979). But what can seem from one perspective antiquated, and certainly deeply unjust, unfortunately makes a lot of sense from a company perspective. The ordinary profit of Nepal's construction companies—who neither invest in land nor sell luxury to tourists—stems from the incremental bonus on singular units of construction.

The going rate for this overhead was 15 percent on each expense unit during the summer of 2019—on each bag of cement, each truckload of sand, each meter of iron rod, and each hour of construction labor. Out of this 15 percent profit, the company had to pay its own workers (the engineering team) and deduct wasted materials and other unforeseen expenses that were not covered by the narrow unit-based contract. Because construction labor—unlike supervision—was a direct contribution to the cost of the building and could be included in the unit price (Bill of Quantities), it was much wiser, from an economic viewpoint, to keep this labor on a subcontract basis (as with other inputs in construction), because this allowed for constant adjustments to supply based on how the project was progressing. Accordingly, when there was a slump in the need for labor—maybe because the necessary raw materials had not yet arrived, which was in fact one of the most frequent reasons for delays in the industry, though legal barriers and conflicts with clients were also common—then no wages would be 'wasted' on unproductive labor. In addition, the larger and more complex constructions that are typical of the new luxury hotels, as explained earlier, require more expensive structures wherein the value component of labor falls relative to the outlays for raw materials. The global standard for the labor composition of large-scale construction projects is somewhere between 5 and 10 percent. On the hotel construction site described above, labor's input was a mere 2.5 percent of the total costs for which the construction company was responsible.

The low value of labor in the overall calculation thus rendered it marginal to profits in the industry while it remained a flexible expense that—unlike prices for cement, over which companies had little influence—could be negotiated downwards if profits were squeezed. I overheard a few negotiations between Sagarmatha's chief engineer Mahatma and different labor contractors. On every single occasion the former, as a company representative, would seek to lower the agreed price by pointing to some kind of fault—a worker here who could not find his safety equipment and had therefore delayed construction; a substandard performance there, which had required extra hours to remedy; or simply skulking laborers who did not, of course, deserve full pay. Keeping construction labor outsourced added a buffer that augmented the power of project managers to keep expenses under control. While luxury construction thus, on the one hand, provoked a rise in expert labor—which added to the total labor component of construction—the informal organization of manual construction labor has in fact deepened under this new regime of labor, precisely because it is perfectly suited to the current needs of capital. This is one of the main contradictions of the dialectical relationship between abstract value and abstract labor to emerge from the new luxury-driven construction boom in high-rises: the relative cheapening of the inputs of manual labor by keeping its organization 'traditional,' and allowing continued 'absolute exploitation.'

The unique nature of the capital employed in luxury accommodation provides important clues to the perseverance and stability of this differential labor regime, which is only partially subsumed to forces of accumulation. While most of the old upscale hotels are in fact converted properties from formerly royal Rana possessions that had been amassed or gifted under the autocratic clan's 104 years of rule (this was the elite ownership over tourism I referred to in the introduction), the post-conflict investments come from established family-owned enterprises who made their fortunes during the industrial boom of the 1990s. Cost-savvy and conservative, these shifts of profits to real estate and services reflect the limited international mobility of capital that still characterizes Nepal's protected financial landscape, which makes it cumbersome for foreign capital to invest in the country, and illegal for domestic capital to be invested abroad for fear of undermining the state's precarious foreign exchange balances. Hotel investors are wary, not frivolous, and definitely not adventurous, thus putting a lid on impulses to experiment with rationalizing the production process. But neither are they poor, having acquired the property well in advance of when prices were low, and it seems that investment costs are mostly equity rather than debt-based, which adds to the status-quoist nature of capital investment in tourism. It is advances of luxury accommodation, not the nature of capital (which merely acts as a lever), that is revolutionizing relations of production. To understand this, we need to look closer at what happens to labor relations after hotels have been built.

## The 'Business' of Global Hoteliers

The incomplete subsumption of construction labor that I have just discussed contrasts with the direct and real subsumption of service laborers in luxury establishments—that is, in finished hotels. Hotel operations respond to different forces of accumulation than do dynamics of construction. The latter is entangled in local state regulation through procurement and building law, and reflects a production process that assembles diverse commodities and creates a temporary 'urban factory.' Hotels, on the other hand, are much more geographically isolated units of production, and the chief 'commodity' they require from outside are travelers, the flow of which are only very marginally controlled by the local political economy.[13]

The 2015 earthquakes deepened the schisms between these two spaces of production, as the collapsing of fragile structures prompted the state to increase its surveillance of building standards. While the construction industry has remained in local hands, embedded in intricate networks that require deep local knowledge to navigate successfully, the high-class hotel industry was differently shaken up and loosened following the geological rumbles. Almost all luxury establishments were forced to shut down, given damages to their infrastructure; and the iconic Everest Hotel only reopened again after a lengthy retrofit in late 2019.

Following the material destruction came a fall in foreign arrivals, down 31.7 percent. When the owners of traditional properties woke up again to the post-disaster building boom, they were facing a new cohort of competitors: property developers who saw an opportunity to extend into the coveted tourism sector with their keen sense of how to build economically to new urban-class sentiments; middle-size businesses who scooped up cheap properties and transformed them into amenity-rich condos that were then sublet at a fraction of the price of expensive establishments, though often with superior facilities; and, most damaging, the handful or so of big industrialists who had grown rich in very different niches but now all declared their intention to open large rival hotels in cooperation with international premium brands, such as Hilton, Dusit-Thani, Marriott, Sheraton, and Holiday Inn.

Yet none of these global conglomerates have directly invested in Nepal's hotel sector, following in part from current trends toward leaner companies geared to more immaterial value forms. Their global push, particularly in peripheral niches, occurs through franchising and management contracts that carry little risk (but steady rewards), and for which property owners pay various fees. Capital flows out, not into Nepal, as entrants pay both for brand affiliation and for the material luxuries necessary to cater to cosmopolitan elites. But the force of branded hotels, who have all matured in much more competitive international environments, has unsettled the old establishments, and created a rush for reforms across their properties, quite unlike the stability of the construction sector.

In August 2019, I was sitting in the recently renovated reception lounge of one of Kathmandu's oldest downtown 5-star hotels, and chatting with the newly appointed general manager. While this privately owned hotel had not signed up with an international brand like so many others, the owners had nonetheless decided to bring in management expertise from global chains to streamline the business with the increased competition from other high-value vendors. Mr. Sapkota, the new GM, had worked for Marriott for fifteen years in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia before landing in Nepal, and he had been taken aback by the colonial charms of this nineteenth-century Rana palace, which had first opened its doors to travelers during the tourism boom of the 1970s. The Nepali owners had since upgraded the facilities to compete with offerings from comparative venues—installing a swimming pool, tennis court, and training center on the large premises, and more than doubling the number of rooms—but the 'palatial' style had deliberately been kept to emphasize an out-of-era luxurious retreat right in the middle of the busy and noisy downtown area.

Sapkota's tenure started in late 2017, as the first national federal elections were signaling a change to the country's fractured political space. And while the GM comes across as carefree and jovial, he drives a hard bargain with his employees. As one of his first controversial moves, Sapkota fired the local management and brought in six new division leaders from India to oversee the restructuring of labor in the hotel. Rather than a dense layer of old managerial positions with supervisors and sub-supervisors in every small 'department'—laundry, front office, cleaning, garden, bar, pool, and so on—the hierarchy was centralized and simplified. This had the obvious 'lean' advantage that fewer people were involved in distributing work, thus potentially boosting productivity. But it was also meant as a device to increase internal mobility, because as Sapkota explained, "you cannot keep somebody for five years as a front office manager . . . everybody wants to grow." The new structure included more incremental positions, which facilitated continuous promotions and underwrote the GM's policy of "developing people," rather than focusing squarely on assignments. In the previous employment environment, "associates," as Sapkota referred to his employees, used to define themselves by their area of work and to hold onto these niches as small fiefdoms of privilege. Sapkota's mission was to instill in hotel workers a flexible attitude to work, and not just to treat it like a 9-to-5 job. When he himself had started working in hospitality twenty years earlier, he was keenly conscious of how he would have to sacrifice ordinary leisure time, such as holidays, to satisfy the needs of customers. He therefore finds it very odd that a head of department for the banquet section would go home at 5 or 6 p.m. when there is an important social event to attend to in the evening: "I expect my HoDs," Sapkota implored, "to be there and to show . . . I mean it's the pride as well of a HoD, like 'Hey see, I am the department head of this area.' I didn't see this, and so this didn't work for me."

Above all, then, Sapkota sought to break the culture of work at the hotel. Hospitality enterprises operate in segmented fields of competition. Only the handful or so other five-star establishments in Kathmandu comprised for Sapkota what GMs across the spectrum referred to as a hotel's 'Comp Set'—the immediate and direct competitors for the same class of customers, against which benchmarks of performance are necessary. But the heightened competition in what used to be a smaller niche market, where each hotel had its own characteristic profile and 'Unique Selling Point'—the Soaltee with its spacious premises in a quiet area of town, the Radisson with its downtown casino at a convenient location, the Hyatt closer to the airport and in serene surroundings—was slowly being eroded by the arrival of streamlined and brand-operated businesses, which forced older establishments to follow suit. Sapkota's international experience and his long stint with an American chain allowed him to compare these much more competitive markets with the situation in Nepal; and, like many others, he saw the old labor arrangements as a barrier to a more flexible, more productive, but also a more customer-oriented work culture. He was clear that bringing in new foreign supervisors was a deliberate way of "set[ting] up a new culture," because replacing the Nepali management would make it easier for him to change what he called "the structure of work." When he arrived, the staff-to-room ratio stood at more than 2:1, and he was trying to bring this down to 1.5:1, which would still be a good deal above what he saw as a 'global' standard of 1.1:1.[14]

The "structure" of employment in the hospitality industry developed with the growth of formal employment during the 1970s and 1980s, when state and industrial enterprises spread rapidly in tandem with the ambitious development plans of the bourgeoning post-Rana *panchayat* regime. These years, during which most of the first-generation luxury establishments were formed, also saw the rise of employers' and employees' associations, with the Nepal Independent Hotel Workers' Union established in 1980 during years of heightened labor militancy. Due to the great concentration of labor at luxury establishments, their high-profile locations, and the sensitivity of hotels to negative reviews that transcend moments of disruption, the labor union was successful in wresting de facto control of labor management across different properties—a power they have continued to wield until quite recently, when the arrival of international GMs have forced a disruption of local union leaders' control of labor issues. What really irked Sapkota was less the staff-to-room ratio than his lacking space for maneuver in hiring and firing staff. He was faced with the double challenge of an extremely immobile working force at an annual turnover of less than 1 percent (compared to the 20 percent he was accustomed to), and a local union that resisted any layoffs and intervened to secure their candidates for new openings and promotions. With most hotel workers having been in the same jobs for twenty to thirty years, it was indeed a superb challenge for the new GM to disrupt the 'culture' of work without also challenging the union. He therefore consciously faced down the union representatives by refusing to meet with them without an approved agenda, and then only in small groups to break what he considered an aggressive style of demanding:

> At the moment I am not dealing with any union because . . . I know unions differently. I know unions that are doing good things for the associates . . . Here, I find only egocentrism. So, at the moment, I tell them you give me an agenda and then three or four people can come. Then we can discuss something. But this is not what they want. They want to come with 10–15 people because only then do they feel strong. If they are by themselves, they are the nicest people, you know; but once they are there, 15 people together, they just . . . they are screaming, they are shouting. This is not how I want to run my hotel.

The hotel industry's struggle with labor unions is not new in Nepal, and the Hotel Association Nepal—which represent the interest of owners—has repeatedly lobbied for more 'cordial' labor relations. Conflicts between labor and hospitality enterprises, including restaurant workers, intensified during the Maoist insurgency, as they supported labor unrest across industrial sectors. Following the 2006 peace agreement when the Maoists came aboveground and started focusing on politicizing urban areas, labor actions in hotels intensified further. Some establishments, such as the Radisson, became renowned for their routine conflicts with unions; GMs were regularly chased away by militant workers, even, on one occasion, being forced to flee under the cover of night. Such stories, and fears, were shared by GMs of large establishments where the affluence of their clientele and premises contrasted markedly with the rewards of hotel workers. The huge wage gap between guests and local workers, which is accentuated by economic inequalities between nations and requires a calculated (in)visibility of labor (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014), possibly goes a long way in accounting for why hotels in South Asia have remained profitable despite such high staff-to-room ratios compared with more competitive markets.

Sapkota was therefore not alone in considering the structure and culture of hotel labor a frontline in his struggle to upgrade a 40-year-old establishment to current performance benchmarks. Across the field of luxury accommodations, property owners were approaching international chains to hire senior staff who had experience from foreign markets. Several new GMs from abroad have been hired just within the past 2–3 years to signal this strategic shift, and many were seeking ways to break labor's relative strength in setting terms of employment. The new Radisson GM, for instance, took a confrontational line with the union, as had Sapkota, and he fired key union representatives from his hotel—a move he himself considered to be extremely dangerous and quite unprecedented in the history of the industry. At the Hyatt, likewise, a management decision to reduce compensatory and sick leave in June 2019 led to a strike by the four hundred workers, and a temporary closure of the hotel because of what union representatives considered unprovoked 'harassment' of workers. These examples illustrate the extent to which the breaking of labor's power has become a battlefield in a sectoral drive to keep luxury accommodation profitable.

The conflicts between workers and managers that I have sketched here build on contradictions that are in elementary ways internal to the tourism industry. John Urry had already pointed to a major opposition in the area of "working under the tourist gaze" as he related to how tourist experiences were based on "an expectation of the extraordinary," but at the same time the poorly paid service workers were organized "under conditions of profit maximization" (Urry 2002: 59). Luxury hotels accentuate this contradiction because of the higher value of the product on offer, and this often requires extra emotional work—more 'Nepali smiles'—to underline the extravagant hospitality that is essential for the 'brand' on offer. Naomi Klein, in her 2001 book *No Logo*, speaks of branding as the ability to use the symbolic power of imagery to reconfigure experiences of consumption so that they increasingly become mediated by visual narratives (Klein 2005). The adage that what retailers of tourism ultimately sell are not physically tangible products but rather experiences, forms a crucial component of a GM's management perspective. Consequently, they try hard to drive down the price they must pay for service labor, while retaining, or even elevating, its integration with the hotel brand. Such a perspective on hotel labor is generally absent from tourism studies, which, if it deals with labor at all, considers labor on its own terms as separate from the thrust of accumulation (Adler and Adler 2004); or, as has been customary for anthropologists, it explores the opposition between tourists and tourist workers (Crick 1989; Urry 2002), not between management and labor. What is interesting about luxury accommodations in this regard is that general managers, as chief executives of operations, are less managers of the property than they are of the service functions of the hotel—that is, of the total facilities that encapsulate and package the brand of high-class hotels into a commodity for paying customers—what Michael Haywood has termed a hotel's "virtual assets" (Haywood 1998: 283). Their conflict with labor is not just one of cheapening input costs through productivity gains, but rather of being able to control the expressions of 'service' by tying laborers' work more closely into the perspective of the luxury brand as an ideological expression of the alliance between capital and consuming middle classes.

Unlike in the construction sector, where luxury frontlines are promoting new hierarchies based on expertise but are otherwise relying on feudal-style networks for the bulk of labor mobilization, the service side of the boom in tourism properties has thus resulted in visible antagonisms that have the potential to become permanent rifts in the hotel sector. The new high-end hotels that opened in 2019, with their international management teams and industry-wide SOPs (standard operating procedures), are already institutionalizing a different labor regime, one that bypasses unions and formalizes the power of corporate heads. I think we can push the analysis of these distinctions even further by considering the way capital expansion articulates with different spaces of labor. Construction laborers, who chiefly circulate between rural areas and urban building sites, make up a huge 'footloose' mobile labor force,[15] but because they remain outside formal labor market regulation their spaces of reproduction occur on the margins of the state—invisibilized and irrelevant. Or, to put it in the terms of regimes of value: because the dialectics of production and reproduction are politically and geographically separated into uneven spaces, they rarely result in tangible counterpressures by affected populations. By contrast, local construction experts are more tightly integrated into accumulation processes and receive accreditation through government-established schools for engineering, and likewise tourism service laborers through hotel and tourism diplomas. The physical mobility of the latter has been much more


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limited than is the case with construction laborers, and many have worked for the same companies since they graduated. This explains the 'stubbornness' with which this group of workers hang on to their jobs, and the unions' role in patrolling access for newcomers. We are thus seeing two very different effects, and different frontlines, of the same capitalist globalization, precisely because it combines two contrasting value regimes.

## Conclusion

Neil Smith saw in forces of capital a "seesaw" movement of value inflation and deflation, as the constant search for value extraction drove a brutal transformation of urban landscapes across postwar US cities (Smith 2010). Such processes are also visible in many parts of South Asia, where urban metropoles have followed the paradoxical push towards growth-induced planetary slums (Davis 2006). But South Asia responds differently to value expansions of the built environment than has been the case for North America, where infrastructural expansion was, from the outset of the colonial exploration, tied to the rise of corporate capital (Bakan 2004), and where intimate links between business, buildings, and political power continue to hold sway. Tycoons in India and Nepal have not to the same degree built their empires from investments in concrete, nor from close alliances with the state apparatus, and this is particularly the case in the mountainous regions toward the north that resist fast-paced, expansive infrastructural development, and where shielded agricultural hinterlands have provided a historical buffer against centralized (but not localized) exploitation (Gellner 2008). Add to this that large-scale infrastructural expansion across this geopolitically sensitive region in both railways and roads—for the past two centuries a recurring battlefield between expansive British, Nepalese, Chinese, and Indian impulses—is coordinated and often built directly by specialized departments of the military. Tellingly, Nepal's most successful industrialist, and one of the new investors in extravagant accommodation, built his fortunes from instant noodles, a low-profile apolitical commodity. In a region where the majority of the population have very limited purchasing power, and the state controls key infrastructural industries, the space for capitalist creativity differs from the experience of North Atlantic economies.

This suggests that we should be careful with uncritically universalizing Smith's US-based analysis of how to think about value frontiers and uneven geography. In crucial ways, the development of the urban building mass remains disaggregated from control of the crucial transport infrastructure on which it depends, and it is therefore only recently that any significant investment in this sector has occurred, with tourism accommodation acting as a kind of test case for the business durability of real estate. Apart from empirical differences between the United States and northern South Asia, this also points to a limit in Smith's assumption that urban regeneration necessarily results from the "restlessness" of capital. The capital I have considered is not an anonymous blunt force of accumulation but is tied to specific social projects and industrial energies. Rather than 'restless,' this socially and institutionally conditioned capital is better understood as ambitious but conservative, as it seeks not just to increment value but to build status and lasting enterprises. Nepal's tourism capital partakes in several supplementary outcomes, ranging from using hotel investment to protect profits from political tribute payments (through taxation or otherwise), to over-parking of industrial profits while waiting for better investment opportunities (in which case hospitality is better understood as a form of banking), to using expensive infrastructure as a monument to previous accomplishments (where it functions more like a payment or luxury commodity in itself). In each of these cases, capital investment does more (but never less) than conform to Marx's formula for capital circulation, M-C-M, which is the heart of the 'profit motive.' These added social projects of capital can help explain why some value frontlines become more confrontational than others; and even why, in some cases, unique alliances between hotel owners and workers can momentarily stabilize themselves over the protection of 'traditional values.'

In this chapter, I have offered an analysis of luxury tourism as a frontline in the unfolding of capitalist globalization. It is a moment that, on the one hand, unites the supply and demand of new segments of classed travelers from Asian countries with the continued domination of the US hospitality sector. Nepal's frenzied hotel expansion is lifted from a Euro-American experience, and most of the new general managers in the industry have European origins and extensive experiences from Western brands. It will be interesting to see how long this 'hybridity' will last. But it expresses more generally the struggle over Nepal's political future by rivalling Chinese, Indian, and US diplomats, a struggle that takes place on all levels of political life, and which has only increased with the rise of Xi Jinping and Narenda Modi. On the other hand, the production of a revamped hospitality industry that charts new paths for operations of infrastructural capital in Nepal is a compound of 'local' factors, of nascent industrial capital battling 'historical' royal privileged classes, while colluding to mobilize labor, across different projects and through different political economic alliances, to produce the value that 'luxury' requires for it to run smoothly. These are frontlines riven with tensions of pressures and counterpressures, at all levels of operations. I have highlighted two, in particular: first, the growth of a 'quasi-aristocratic' class of engineers, which puts increasing downward pressure on manual construction labor through a retention, and thereby deepening, of traditional 'feudal' subcontracting procedures; and secondly, a wholesale disruption of hospitality's labor arrangements with both union power and the 'cultural' values of work as concrete institutions to be remade according to Euro-American hegemonic (i.e., neoliberal) norms.

To what extent will these altered regimes of value become gateways for wider institutional changes in the Himalayan region? This depends, I would suggest, both on the success of the current hospitality moment and on the entrenchment of the new generation of elites, cosmopolitan and secular, in Nepal's political fabric. Large-scale hotel construction has charted a development that is largely irreversible, given the way it has managed to combine an image of earthquake-safety with middle-class consumerist aspirations in a squeezed land market. This will gradually put engineers in the driving seat of infrastructural development, at least of the politically non-critical kind, even if the 'frivolity' of luxury tourism turns out to be a dead end for capital. The consequences for labor, however, depend more on the possibilities for superseding the steady spread of neoliberal 'middle-class' values, which is undermining the traditional unions that have emerged under the political patronage of the *panchayat* years. This, in turn, requires a new political compact and a renewed left movement, which at this point is not very likely with the overall discrediting of socialism in Nepal after the sellout of the erstwhile Maoists. Will a new elite be able to challenge the caste-based organization of the entire political system and pave the way for an 'enlightened,' 'bourgeois,' revolution? Not likely, given the dependence of this elite on the politico-economic infrastructure of the Indian landscape, itself undergoing a massive democratic crisis. And unlike at the takeoff of the Maoist moment in the early 1990s, Nepal's subaltern classes will find it hard to unite with comrades in India, where the 'subaltern moment' has been crushed too, at the same time as the history of Chinese Maoism is being sanitized to the point where it has become a capitalist ruling ideology, rather than a critical pedagogy of revolution. The value struggles set in motion by luxury tourism's push to open new markets thus result in new contradictions that will shape relations between capital, class, and labor for a long time to come.

**Dan Hirslund** is an independent anthropologist working with questions of social value and political transformation. He taught at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Anthropology and Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies between 2008 and 2021. His research has focused on political activism in Nepal's Maoist movement, on labor solidarities and precarity, and most recently on tourism and construction. The present chapter reports on his research into the framework of the Frontlines of Value Program at the University of Bergen.

## Notes

1. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of travelers rose from 440 million to 1.4 billion, and today accounts for around 10.3% of global GDP. Figures are from UNWTO and WTTC websites.
2. In the same 30-year period, the share of global arrivals in the Asia and Pacific region have increased from 12.8 to 24.4% (Roser 2017).
3. This study started in 2015 as an investigation into the precarious livelihoods of migrating working classes in the construction industry, for which I carried out seven months of fieldwork with day laborers on and off construction sites in Kathmandu. From late 2017, I began focusing on the organization and investment of urbanized infrastructure. Fieldwork during the summer of 2018 and 2019 allowed me to explore more closely the economy of investments in luxury hotels, and its relationship to the existing premium accommodation market. This second part of the research has been carried out with tourism promoters, investors, construction companies, and hotel operators combining interviews and participant observations. I thank the Danish Research Council and the University of Bergen for financial support.
4. Arrivals have been steadily rising since 2015, which marked the end of a prolonged post-conflict recovery from a decade (1996–2006) of violent conflict between Maoist insurgents and a fragile state apparatus.
5. For the Mediterranean, see Boissevain 1996, and Hazbun 2008; for the Caribbean and related US peripheries, see Adler and Adler 2004, Brenner and Aguilar 2002, and Bryden 1973; for South East Asia, see Coles 2008 and Richter 1982, 1989.
6. Because of an open border with India, it is possible to travel between the two countries without a visa, and this in turn allows Indian citizens to visit Nepal—including the important historic Buddhist site of Lumbini, which is right on the border but on Nepal territory. It is therefore generally assumed that the actual number of tourists from India visiting Nepal is much higher than enumerated for the tourist visa scheme.
7. But only relative. As I document in a forthcoming book, the stability of the NCP-

dominated state apparatus and the political signals they have sent since coming to power in January 2018 have been central in propping up investor confidence, even if the state has not been eager to support the industry financially.

8. The names of companies and people participating in the research have been anonymized, as has, in some cases, participants' genders in order to blur recognition.
9. There are no official data on hotel's revenue compositions, but it was well known in the industry that the so-called F&B market (Food & Beverage) is very high in Kathmandu compared to European and American markets. One general manager for a newly opened hotel with a background in the Indian hotel industry claimed that this was the case throughout South Asia due to regional religious, kin, and festivity cultures. Several of the key personnel I interviewed from a range of top hotels claimed that their F&B revenues accounted for at least 30 percent of their earnings, in many cases 50 percent, and in a few special cases they were even higher. This is important to keep in mind when discussing the links between hotels and tourism, because the former are not completely dependent on the travel industry—a fact borne out during the Covid-19 pandemic, when some hotels were able to remain open and break even without income from their rooms.
10. The number of privately registered vehicles, according to the Department of Transport Management, grew from just over half a million in 2006/07 to over 3 million by mid-2018; and in 2018, five times as many vehicles were registered annually as had been the case one decade earlier.
11. According to the Nepal Land & Housing Developers' Association, this chronic scarcity is further aggravated by an annual demand for 140,000 new houses in Nepal when only 25,000 are being built. A staggering 42 percent of this demand is in the Kathmandu Valley.
12. I offer a more detailed analysis of this labor regime in an article on labor stops for construction workers in Kathmandu (Hirslund 2019).
13. This flow is controlled, more directly, by international travel agents that are themselves often owned by large multinational corporations, which may at the same time have stakes in airline companies and other hotel chains. See Michael Clancy (2011) for a discussion of some of these major global commodity chains in tourism. Such a GCD analysis, unfortunately, does not at present exist for Nepal.
14. The 1.1 employee-per-room ratio is in fact more likely an American standard, though of course this ratio rises with the star-rating of the property. Across the early 2000s, five-star hotels in Rome recorded a ratio of 1.2–1.3:1, whereas the Indian market is very similar to Nepal's with a 2.7:1 ratio for luxury properties. The Intercontinental Hotel Group has explained that they employ twice the ratio in India compared to the US for the same standard of hotel.
15. The reference here is to Jan Breman's work on agricultural laborers in the Indian state of Gujarat who lost their livelihoods in the agricultural economy but were unable to establish themselves permanently in the new industrialized sector on the urban fringes, and therefore had to resort to an existence of permanent seasonal mobility, informality, and even invisibility (Breman 1996). Construction laborers in Nepal, as I have also documented elsewhere (Hirslund 2019), have much in common with the ongoing dispossession of rural livelihoods across India due to the open border between the two countries, which has turned the entire Gagentic Plain into one continuous accumulation regime (Sugden 2017).

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