



# The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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## EMERGING TREND OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES : OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS

~ *Jashandeep Kaur*

### INTRODUCTION

With people and communities scattered around the world, migration has always been a fundamental component of South Asian civilization and economics. A sizable portion of the world's population lives in South Asian countries, which are made up of the eight members of the South Asian Council of Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bhutan. Migration from these nations has changed communities not only in the migrants' home countries but also throughout the world. The South Asian diaspora is among the biggest in the world, with India having the largest diaspora at over 17.7 million, followed by Bangladesh at seven million and Pakistan at over six million migrants.<sup>1</sup> These three countries all rank among the top ten largest diasporas worldwide. The movement of labor is essential to both national and international economic growth.

According to the demographic transition theory, as a nation develops, it shifts from a pre-modern system of high fertility and high mortality to a postmodern one where both are low. One of its categories, labor migration, is primarily characterized as international mobility aimed at pursuing job opportunities in the country of destination. It comprises immigrants from a variety of backgrounds, including highly skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers.<sup>2</sup> These days, migration can take many different forms, including return migration, forced migration, refugee migration, asylum seeker migration, and so forth. No matter the kind of migration, people who from their homes owing to natural disasters, construction projects, or socio-political unrest travel across internal or external

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<sup>1</sup>Retrieved from:- <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/making-migration-safer-and-moreproductive-south-asia>

<sup>2</sup>Wickramasinghe AA, Wimalaratana W. International Migration and Migration Theories. Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences. 2016;1(5):13–32.

borders. People are impacted by displacement in a variety of ways, and as they adjust to new circumstances, stress and sadness are common side effects. The influence of labor migration is directly linked to social transformation processes.<sup>3</sup>

There is a long history of labor migration occurring in many historical periods and international locations. These days, the primary driver is the ongoing pursuit of better employment prospects, which studies migration and analyzes the factors contributing to the formation of a sizable portion of both internal and international migration stocks. Other than employment or income, there may be other factors driving migration, including family reunification, educational opportunity, political persecution, armed conflict, and climate change.<sup>4</sup>

## **BACKGROUND**

Labour migration has a long history in South Asia, dating back to colonial times when indentured laborers were sent to various parts of the world, including the Caribbean, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The migrant labor system was a historical one that was created by capitalist, colonial, and apartheid forces to balance the goals of keeping black people in rural areas far from "white" cities and the competing demands for cheap labor in the mines and cities of "white" South Africa.

In the post-colonial era, the region witnessed significant intra-regional migration as well as migration to the Gulf countries for employment opportunities in sectors such as construction, oil, and gas industries. Over time, labour migration has become a vital component of the region's economy, driven by factors such as population growth, rapid urbanization, and disparities in income and employment opportunities among South Asian countries.

Employment sectors and migration routes exhibit significant gender inequality. Women migrants employed as domestic workers have traditionally left in significant numbers for Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In South-East Asia, women have greater possibilities for employment. They can work in manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality, and, to a lesser extent, construction. Men make up the majority of migrant labor flows to the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) construction industries. This also holds true for the East and South-East Asian fishing industry and the seasonal labor flows from the Pacific Islands to Australia and New Zealand.

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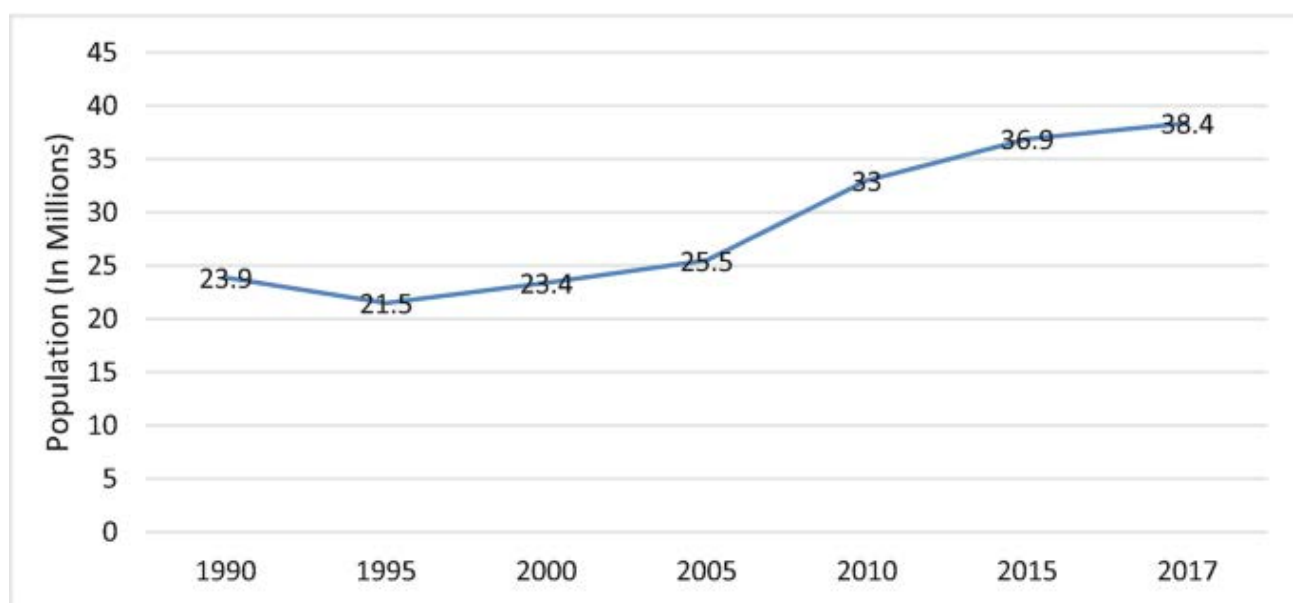
<sup>3</sup>Bell S, Alves S, de Oliveira ES, Zuin A. Migration and Land Use Change in Europe: A Review. *Liv Rev Land Res.* 2010;4.

<sup>4</sup>Castles S. Understanding Global Migration: A Social Transformation Perspective. *J Ethnic Migration Stud.* 2010;36(10):1565–1586.

Although the numbers vary by country and sub-region, irregular migration happens in tandem with normal migration, and there are few reliable sources of data on estimated irregular flows.

Nearly 15 million South Asians currently reside in the GCC countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Kuwait, which are the most popular migration destinations from the region. As previously stated, a significant portion of these migrants arrive in these nations as unskilled or semiskilled laborers. These laborers have formed the backbone of the Gulf economies for decades, leaving a lasting impression on both their economics and communities.

But during the past few decades, there has also been a rise in highly skilled migration and student flows to rich western nations including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Khadria, 2005). India is home to the second-largest migrant student population globally, with the majority of these students pursuing higher education in the US and becoming what Rajan and Wadhawan (2014) refer to as "future diasporas."<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 1** Stock of South Asian Nationals living abroad 1990–2017. Source: ILO, 2018

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS OF LABOUR MIGRATION**

Everywhere, at all times, and in every season, migration is a worldwide concern. One of the most evident effects of labor migration, which has both beneficial and harmful effects on civilizations

<sup>5</sup> Rajan, S.I. (2023). Migration in South Asia: Old and New Mobilities. In: Rajan, S.I. (eds) Migration in South Asia. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34194-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34194-6_1)

around the world, is social transformation. Due to global factors involving wildly varied historical experiences, economic and social patterns, political structures, and cultures, it so affects all kinds of societies in both developed and developing nations. New forms of national and international social distinction are also being brought about by globalization.<sup>6</sup>

## MAJOR POLITICAL EVENTS

Numerous conflicts and important political events that occurred in Southern Asia between the middle of the 20th century and the beginning of the 2000s had a big impact on migratory movements.

- Approximately five million Hindus and Sikhs migrated from Pakistan to India following India's independence in 1947, whereas approximately six million Muslims emigrated from India to Pakistan. Decolonization also led to significant migration from India to the United Kingdom (UN ESCAP et al., 2012).<sup>7</sup>
- There are large number of Iranian diasporas overseas as a result of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1980s war with Iraq.
- Approximately two million Iraqi migrants moved to the Islamic Republic of Iran as a result of the Halabja catastrophe in the late 1980s and the Iraq War in 1991.
- Six million individuals are reported to have departed Afghanistan between 1979 and 1992 as a result of the Soviet Union's invasion (UNHCR, 2009), with roughly 3.2 million heading towards Pakistan and 2.2 million to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite international return programs, protracted political instability keeps the number of Afghan migrants high. An estimated 1 million Afghan refugees remain in the Islamic Republic of Iran, while about 1.5 million are officially recognized as refugees in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2020a).<sup>8</sup>
- Mass internal displacement and refugee outflows were caused by nearly 30 years of civil war in Sri Lanka (UN ESCAP et al., 2012).<sup>9</sup>
- Thousands of Rohingya refugees have escaped from Myanmar to Bangladesh since 2016. The Cox's Bazar district is currently home to 860,000 refugees who are in need of shelter (UNHCR, 2020b).

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<sup>6</sup>Tharu D. Labour migration: a socio-cultural factor for social transformation in Banke district, Nepal. *Sociol Int J.* 2023;7(1):13-20. DOI: [10.15406/sij.2023.07.00319](https://doi.org/10.15406/sij.2023.07.00319)

<sup>7</sup>Retrieved from:- [https://www.unescap.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl251/files/SDD\\_PUB\\_Sit-Rep-book.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl251/files/SDD_PUB_Sit-Rep-book.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>Retrieved from:- <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

<sup>9</sup>Retrieved from:- [https://www.unescap.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl251/files/SDD\\_PUB\\_Sit-Rep-book.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl251/files/SDD_PUB_Sit-Rep-book.pdf)

- Other long-term refugee communities in the sub-region include Burmese in Bangladesh, Tibetans and Bhutanese in India and Nepal, and Burmese in Bhutan (UN ESCAP et al., 2012).

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The emerging trends of labour migration in South Asia have far-reaching implications for sending and receiving countries, as well as for migrants themselves. From a policy perspective, there is a need for comprehensive migration governance frameworks that protect the rights of migrant workers, ensure their access to social services, and promote safe and orderly migration channels. Moreover, efforts should be made to address the root causes of migration, including poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities, through targeted interventions in education, skills development, and job creation. Additionally, enhancing cooperation and dialogue among South Asian countries is crucial for addressing cross-border challenges such as human trafficking, smuggling, and labor exploitation. Overall, addressing the opportunities and challenges of labour migration in South Asia requires a concerted effort from governments, civil society, and the private sector to ensure that migration contributes to inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

## **COVID-19 IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES**

However, all of the participating nations must respond more cogently and jointly to the shifting dynamics and patterns of migration from South Asia. Given the COVID-19 epidemic, the current state of the economy, and Migration in South Asia: Traditional and Contemporary Forms of Mobility There will probably be eight social changes as a result. Since the pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities that South Asian migrants previously faced, we are already witnessing many of the consequences over three years after they began. Emergency evacuations of persons initially caused a sharp increase in the number of migrants returning to South Asian nations.<sup>10</sup>

Numerous factors, such as inadequate access to high-quality preventative and responsive healthcare, crowded housing, employment in the informal sector and jobs with little opportunity for physical distance, have contributed to the high COVID-19 infection rates among migrant workers (ILO 2021j; APHR 2021; UN 2020). Communities of migrant workers in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the GCC countries have high incidence of COVID-19 cases and fatalities (APHR 2021; Illmer 2020).

During the first nine months of the pandemic, nearly half (47%) of Singapore's migrant labor population contracted COVID-19 (Illmer 2020). The Singapore Ministry of Health reports that as of

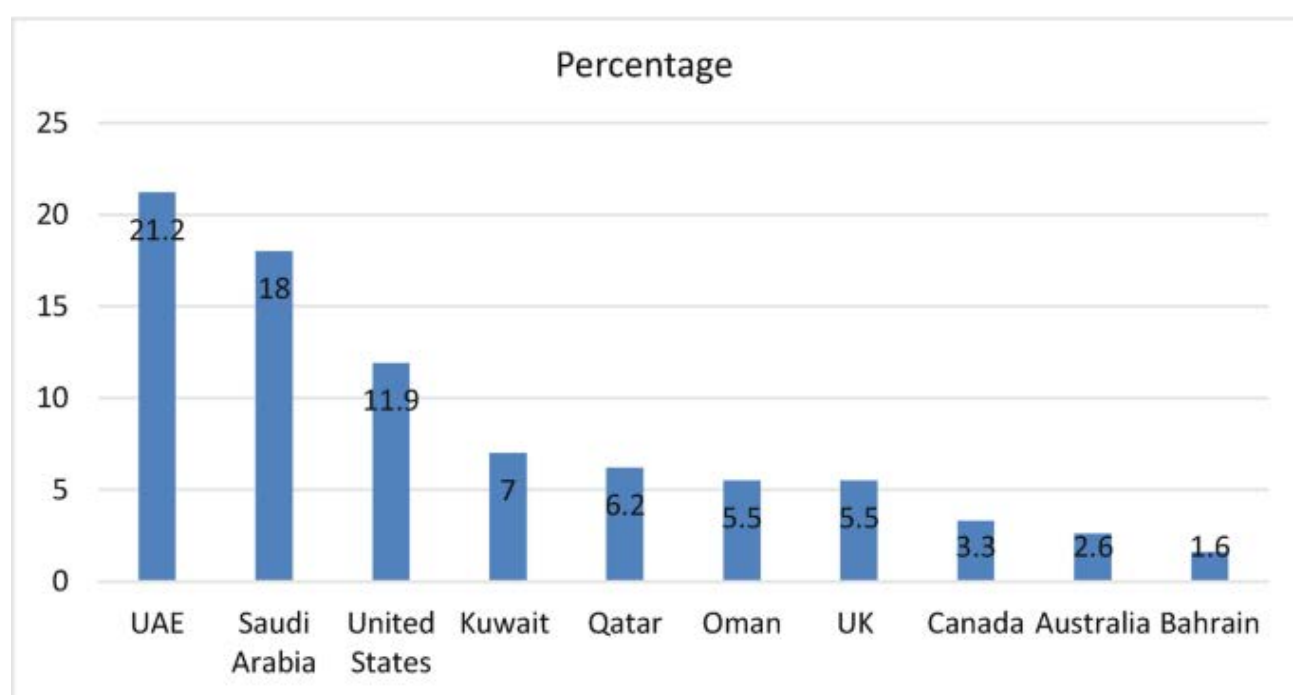
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<sup>10</sup> Rajan, S.I. (2023). Migration in South Asia: Old and New Mobilities. In: Rajan, S.I. (eds) Migration in South Asia. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34194-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34194-6_1)

mid-February 2021, migrant workers residing in migrant dormitories accounted for almost 90% of all COVID-19 infections (59,800 cases). As of July 31, 2021, foreign workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and Myanmar accounted for at least 14% of infections in Thailand, with an additional 10% of infections among foreign nationals, making up 24% of the COVID-19 positive individuals in Thailand.

At the beginning of the pandemic, migrants in the GCC region were disproportionately afflicted by COVID-19 cases. Although foreigners made up 37% of Saudi Arabia's population overall, 73% of the nation's verified COVID-19 cases occurred in April 2020 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia MOH 2020). According to Khamis et al. (2020), 64.2% of COVID-19 cases reported in Oman between 24 February and 17 April 2020 were migrants, who make up 40% of the country's population. However, immigrants in other Asian nations or regions might not have greater infection rates than natives. As of May 2021, 87% of countries in Asia and the Pacific had implemented COVID-19 related social protection measures—a total of 363 measures across the region, including special allowances and/or grants, income and/or job protection, and health measures. Many migrant workers depend on emergency support and humanitarian help distributed by UN agencies, civil society organizations, and trade unions because they have limited access to social protection.<sup>11</sup> A portion of the detained migrants in Japan were freed to return to their home countries but was unable to because of border barricades. Civil society largely backed the liberated migrants.

## REMMITANCE



<sup>11</sup>Retrieved from:- <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/797536/labor-migration-asia.pdf>

Fig. 2 Origin of remittances into South Asia as a percent of total remittances.<sup>12</sup>

Even though remittances play a significant part in South Asian society, there aren't many systems in place to guarantee safe and affordable remittance routes. The majority of transaction fees are still far greater than the 3% of total remittances required by UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) objective 10(c). This has resulted in an increase in unsafe and illicit money transfer methods, which ultimately wind up being more exploitative of the migrants and their families back home in addition to undermining the development objectives of the countries of origin.

### **ISSUES WITH CIRCULAR AND TEMPORARY MIGRATION PLANS**

Making room for improper recruitment practices

- Possible shortcomings in protection when it comes to limitations on labor rights
- Inefficiencies brought on by a short time span and/or the requirement for migrants to leave their place of employment in order to qualify for rehire
- Increasing the amount of precarious work by using temporary labor to address structural (permanent) labor shortages
- Tying employees to a single employer, which could result in circumstances akin to forced labor
- Retention of passports as a tendency
- No chance of a family get-together encourages sporadic migration or employment

### **RECENT TRENDS**

Large-scale internal and international movements brought on by political, economic, and sub-regional social events have shaped migration patterns in Southern Asia and continue to do so today. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) produced the Report Migration in India, 2020–21, which is based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey ( PLFS) 2020–21. It states that the overall migration rate in India was 28.9%, with a 26.5% rate in rural areas. About 10.8% of all migrants left their home country for reasons connected to their jobs. The factors associated to employment include looking for work or a better job, seeking employment or work (to take up employment or to take up better employment/business/proximity to place of work/transfer), and losing work or having a unit closed down or having few job options.<sup>13</sup>

### **NEED TO IMPROVE MIGRANT WELFARE REMAINS**

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<sup>12</sup> Molavi (2020). <https://agsiw.org/economic-contraction-across-the-gulf-chokes-the-fow-of-remittances-to-south-asia/>

<sup>13</sup> Retrived from:- <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/pib1941077.pdf>

The global priorities for addressing the opportunities and problems of migration are widely agreed upon, and they are enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). However, certain programs and policies need to be adjusted to the particular difficulties that every nation and area encounters.

Policies are required in South Asia to support improved governance of the recruitment and protection of migrant workers in order to guarantee decent work, social protection, and the portability of social security entitlements; to improve regular migration pathways throughout the region; and to support nations in the reintegration of labor migrants who have returned. In addition to addressing market flaws in the present migrant worker recruitment process, which is a major contributor to high migration costs, new technology may enhance migrants' access to information.

## **CONCLUSION**

While most people choose against their choice, some people voluntarily migrate. Because of their sociopolitical and economic circumstances, they will inevitably shift. Natural disasters result in the forcible relocation of a sizable population. Every aspect of migration, regardless of its kind, is vital to the flow of people. South Asia is significant for various reasons. There has been a global decline in poverty rates in recent years, and developing nations have seen sharp increases in per capita income. Gains in the South Asia region have been a major factor in these results. There are significant migrant flows in the area. Based on estimates from the ILO, 15 percent of the world's migratory workforce—roughly 164 million people—comes from South and Southeast Asia, with over 19 million males and almost 4 million women.

Even Nevertheless, South Asian immigrants continue to encounter numerous difficulties, such as high expenses and increased hazards to their welfare and personal safety. Many South Asians who are impoverished and who stand to gain the most from temporary migration abroad are unable to access foreign labor markets. International labor migration from South Asia to the most sought-after locations entails some of the highest expenses globally. Migrant laborers from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan typically incur migration expenditures equal to six to twelve months' worth of pay upon arrival at their new location. The risks that migrants encounter are frequently made worse by heavy debt loads taken on to facilitate their migration.

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