

# INTRA AND INTER REGIONAL MOBILITY OF POPULACE OF SOUTH ASIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** In recent decades trans-border migration has become an important component in migration study. It cannot be denied that by now the process of globalization induced worldwide migration and the people of South Asian countries are in line with same process. According to International Migration Organisation that highest migration within Asia is from south Asian countries. This paper looks at three important component i.e. migration within South Asia, secondly Asians mobility across geopolitical boundary to West Asia (Middle East/Gulf Countries) and South East Asia (Malaysia). It can be noted that driving force of south Asian's to migrate overseas is the poverty, unemployment, low quality of live, non availability of basic needs, demand for unskilled workers etc. Within South Asia most of the migrants from neighboring countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka tend to migrate to India as demand for cheap labour is high. As the economy of south Asian countries is low they tend to migrate to places like Gulf region followed by south East Asia, U.K., USA. The outflow of workers from South Asia to the Gulf was in response to the demand following the oil boom which required semi skilled laborer. In South East Asia common destination of migration are Singapore Malaysia and Thailand. While migration takes place it affects the Place of origin as well as place of destination in terms of remittance economy, Poverty alleviation, reduction in unemployment etc. Undoubetly, There are certain issues faced by migrants like women trafficking, Sexual abuse, exploitation by recruitment agency which needs to be tackled.

**Keywords:** globalization, worldwide migration, Asian countries, women trafficking, Sexual abuse.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia, with more than 1.5 billion people, accounts for more than twenty per cent of the world's population. Many countries in the region, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, are undergoing dynamic economic and social changes as globalization and liberalization spread. Issues such as labour law reforms, reservation in the private sector, employment in the ready-made garment industry and labour migration, are becoming increasingly important as South Asia adapts to globalization and growth. (H Sato and Muruyamma, 2015)

Mobility is not a new phenomenon in south Asia. Over the last few decades the demand for labor from India's growing economy, in particular has pulled people from neighboring countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. According to ILO Estimates of migrant laborer for 2010 are 105.5 million out of which a little over 30 million (or almost 30%) were in Asia. <sup>1</sup>The magnitude and complexity of international migration makes it an important force in development and a high-priority issue for both developing and developed countries. One of the most significant changes in migration patterns in the last half century is that more women are migrating than ever before. This is an reflection of empowerment, need for economic enhancement and independency but this also calls upon safety, and better regulations.

Much of the labour migration flows in this large and diverse region with strong economic growth is intra-regional. Labour migration largely occurs under temporary migration regimes and for less skilled work. Women comprise 43 per cent of the flows and are concentrated in domestic work. The region is marked by substantial remittance inflows. <sup>2</sup>South Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are top 10 countries to receive remittance. Migrants from both developed and developing countries are increasingly employed in the formal as well as informal sectors. Governments of destination countries view migrants as merely a workforce to meet labor shortages, hence ignore lot of issues and challenges that are faced by the migrants.

### Aim and objective:

Migration has always had both beneficial and negative impacts on migrants themselves, their origin communities and their destinations ( Hugo Greme, 2007)

The aim of the paper is to highlight

- 1) Analysis of flow of migrants across geopolitical boundary within South Asia and across South Asia
- 2) To review the issues and challenges faced by migrants in South Asia

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Since this is basically a review paper, the study essentially draws on information generated through various studies sponsored by the governments in the region and international agencies such as the International Labour Office (ILO), and International Organization for Migration (IOM). Migration related research and reports of national institutions of various South Asian countries have also constituted an important source of information. Further, research paper being purely descriptive in nature, some inferences are drawn based on the statistical data collected from the secondary source.

### South Asia at a glance:

South Asia includes the current territories of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan which forms the core countries of South Asia, while the mountain countries of Nepal and Bhutan, and island countries of Sri Lanka and Maldives are generally included. The region is also known as 'Indian sub continent' or SAARC region. All the countries of the region, except Sri Lanka, are classified as *low human development* countries. The region is geographically knit together and is homogenous in terms of sociocultural, political, historical, economic, and educational factors. Though South Asian countries largely qualify as "rural" and are dominated by agrarian economies, This fact is no more apparent than when one surveys the cityscapes of South Asia and sees the proliferation of expansive slum communities, home to hundreds of thousands of the urban poor – the once-were-villagers. Poor people are choosing to leave behind their home countries, and oftentimes their immediate families, to work abroad where jobs are more available. Crossing national borders for cheap labor, certain industries – such as construction and domestic work, for example find a steady flow of ready, able-bodied applicants to fulfill these roles just so they are able to send their hard-earned money home and offer financial support.

## 3. DISCUSSION

The Human development index of South Asia is lower to that of world which is one of the prime factors which forces the south Asian people to migrate in areas having high HDI. Sri Lanka and Maldives fare way better than rest of the South Asian countries. Despite its phenomenal advancement in science and technology and success in attracting foreign direct investment India, followed closely by Bhutan, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka and Maldives average HDI value was above the world average of .741. The performances of Bhutan, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh in this regard have been extremely poor.

**Table 1: South Asia - Social and economic indicators at a glance (2014)**

| countries  | GDP (billion US \$) | Literacy rate(%) | Total Population(million) | Poverty level (2 \$ PPP a day) % | Urbanization | HDI   |
|------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------|
| Bangladesh | 186.59              | 57.7             | 156.6                     | 76.54                            | 28.89        | 0.558 |
| Bhutan     | 2.806               | 52.8             | 0.75                      | 2.4                              | 35.57        | 0.584 |
| India      | 2047.81             | 74.04            | 1252                      | 60.6                             | 31.3         | 0.586 |
| Maldives   | 2.405               | 99               | 0.34                      | 15.2                             | 41.2         | 0.698 |
| Nepal      | 19.63               | 66               | 27.8                      | 56                               | 17           | 0.54  |

|             |         |      |       |      |       |       |
|-------------|---------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| Pakistan    | 241.45  | 55   | 182.1 | 50.7 | 36.22 | 0.537 |
| Afghanistan | 36.838  | 28.1 | 30.55 | 36   | 23.55 |       |
| Sri lanka   | 142.719 | 98.1 | 20.48 | 42   | 15.1  | 0.75  |

Source: compiled from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia), [www.indexmundi.com](http://www.indexmundi.com) › Factbook › Countries [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_percentage\\_of\\_population\\_living\\_in\\_poverty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_percentage_of_population_living_in_poverty)

A look at demographic and economic trends is quite pertinent while discussing the migration pattern of the populace of South Asia. The population of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are on continues rise. According to population foundation of India, it is estimated that the population of country would reach 1546 million by 2030. There has been a sharp rise in urbanization process as well. 28.89percent of Bangladeshis, 31.30 percent of Indians and 36.22 percent of Pakistanis now live in urban areas. Obviously, internal migration contributes in a major way to this urbanization process. More than 50 percent of population of major countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan is below poverty and thus lack of employment in country of origin forces people to migrate. Most of the countries have lower literacy rate except Sri Lanka and Maldives .These two countries provide semi skilled workers. Also the GDP is low for most of the South Asian countries which forces the people to migrate to countries with higher GDP .

Contemporary trends of migration in South Asia show that in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly professionally qualified persons migrated to the more developed countries, especially the Western countries. In the early 1970s, the spurt in oil prices led to the oil producing countries of the Middle East investing in infrastructure development in a major way, which created a huge demand for different categories of labour. Migrant workers from South Asia joined the labour market predominantly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Iraq and Libya. Since mid-1980s, such migration expanded to the newly industrialized countries in South East Asia and East Asia, such as the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, which faced a shortage of labour force willing to take up the so-called 3D jobs - dangerous, dirty and degraded. The majority of migrant workers from South Asia constitute semi-skilled and unskilled manpower ( Pong – Sul, 2005)

#### Trans border mobility within South Asia:

Migration has become an important livelihood strategy for many people in South Asia. India has almost six million migrants from neighbouring countries, largely from Nepal and Bangla Desh while Pakistan hosts 4.3 million. It is Sri Lanka which has the lowest immigrant numbers.<sup>3</sup> These movements may represent historical trends over a long period of time. For example, the free movement of persons and labor between India and Nepal based on the 1950 Friendship treaty may explain part of the immigrant numbers in India. The Afghan conflict has induced millions of Afghanis to flee into Pakistan as refugees. Despite the return of a large number, around three million still remain in Pakistan. Sri Lanka's failure to grant citizenship to some part of Tamil plantation workers and their families despite long periods of stay in the country makes them still migrants.

**Table 2: Status of migration in South Asia**

| Country     | Origin | Destination | Transit |
|-------------|--------|-------------|---------|
| Bangladesh  | *      |             | *       |
| India       | *      | *           | *       |
| Nepal       | *      |             |         |
| Pakistan    | *      | *           | *       |
| Sri Lanka   | *      |             | *       |
| Afghanistan | *      |             |         |
| Bhutan      | *      |             |         |

Source: - Piarsiri Wicramasekara 2010.op.cit

Considering the status of migration in the region, it can be perceived that India and Pakistan are major destination countries. India and Pakistan has three kind of status as both are the countries of origin, destination and transit. Bangladesh and srilanka are country of origin and transit. The free movement of persons and labor between India and Nepal based on the 1950 Friendship treaty may explain part of the immigrant numbers in India. From Bhutan around 1 lakh refugees are forced to leave in Nepal refugee camp.<sup>4</sup> In case of Sri Lanka, it is found that after the end of civil war in 2002, many Tamil refugees went back to India as Srilankan government did not agree to citizenship of some Tamils plantation workers.

Most of people from neighboring countries migrate to India as here there is high demand for unskilled cheap labor. Other countries were South Asian migrate are in Gulf countries as well as South East Asia like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, Malaysia, Thailand where demand for Semi skilled labour is high in domestic as well as industrial sector .

**Table 3: Main Destination Markets for Migrants from Select South Asian Countries( 2011 )**

| Country of Origin | Number ('000s) | Main Destination Countries   |
|-------------------|----------------|--|
| Bangladesh        | 5,380.2        | Malaysia, Jordan, India<br>Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, UK, USA, Italy       |
| India             | 11,357.5       | Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka<br>Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, UK, USA, Canada |
| Nepal             | 982.1          | Thailand, India, Japan,<br>Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UK, USA, Canada, Australia       |
| Pakistan          | 4,667          | India,<br>Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, UK, USA, Italy, Canada         |
| Sri Lanka         | 1,847.5        | India, Jordan<br>Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, UK, Canada, Italy       |

Source: Compiled from World Bank (2011), *Migration and Remittance Factbook*

### South Asian migration to Gulf Countries:

The Arab Gulf States are the primary destination for South Asian labor migrants. Recent recorded outflows from the five major countries have been in the order of 2 million workers annually.

**Table 4: Main Destination Markets for Migrants from Select South Asian Countries( 2011 )**

| Countries  | Bahrain | Kuwait | Oman    | Qatar | Saudi Arabia |
|------------|---------|--------|---------|-------|--------------|
| Bangladesh | 3.04    | 0.006  | 29.39   | 2.84  | 3.26         |
| India      | 2.37    | 7.48   | 12.23   | 6.91  | 47.96        |
| Nepal      | 1.92    | 3.61   | 1.01    | 42.76 | 29.53        |
| Pakistan   | 1.41    | 1.48   | 8.93    | 2.41  | 32.93        |
| Srilanka   | 3.09    | 21.07  | 2.90702 | 23.49 | 31.05        |

Source: Figures are from government statistical sources from each individual country where available and from the ADBI-OECD report on *Managing Migration to Support Inclusive and Sustainable Growth, 2013*

High levels of unemployment and underemployment, low wages and widespread poverty prevalent in the South Asian countries are often cited as the reasons that forced large-scale migration from South Asia to the Gulf countries. However, as critically analyzed by Oishi (2005), if we look at poverty as a highly determining force, it would seem that there would be a higher rate of migration from a country like Bangladesh which is comparatively poorer than many of its South Asian neighbors<sup>5</sup>. A closer analysis reveals that, apart from the economic aspect, cultural and historical factors the role played by the State to determine and shape the migration flows.

As noted, the outflow of workers from South Asia to the Gulf was in response to the demand following the oil boom of the 1970s. During the initial phase of migration, labor flows mostly involved male workers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, who were primarily low skilled workers. The demand for female migrants, as medical/health care personnel and as domestic workers, followed after the construction boom (Chammartin, 2005)<sup>6</sup>. India emerges as the major labour sending country to all the gulf countries, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Historical and contemporary links have contributed to the position of India as a major sending and receiving country of international migrants. It is estimated that there are about 5 million overseas Indian workers all over the world, with the majority in the Gulf countries. In the initial period, the construction sector attracted the largest share of India's low skilled and semi-skilled workers; however, there was an increase in the share of skilled workers in the later phase. Within the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the major destinations.

Poverty seems to be the driving force for labour migration from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and partially for Pakistan. Bangladesh is a late entrant in the Gulf labor market. As Oishi (2005) notes, an important reason was the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan which was viewed in a bad light in the Middle East and often wrongly interpreted as 'a rejection of Muslim identity'<sup>5</sup>.

**Southeast Asia as a Destination Market:**

Migration from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in South Asia to the Southeast Asian countries of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand constitutes an important migration corridor in Asia. Malaysia and Singapore are two common destination markets in Southeast Asia for

**Table 5: Main Destination Markets for Migrants from Select South Asian Countries( 2011 )**

| destination | Japan | Jordon | Korea | Malaysia  | Philippines | Singapore | Thailand |
|-------------|-------|--------|-------|-----------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| Bangladesh  | 11385 | 56978  | 5227  | 122912    | 939         | 20432     | 5180     |
| India       | 20827 | 28974  | 2848  | 106880    | 5767        | 157114    | 24219    |
| Nepal       | 9492  | 1493   | 3092  | 18,76,802 | 767         | NA        | 35860    |
| Pakistan    | 9440  | 26776  | 5378  | 16477     | 1534        | 22932     | 7764     |
| Srilanka    | 8791  | 102709 | 8072  | 4453      | 189         | 3016      | 27015    |

Source: Compiled from World Bank, World Development Indicators Database, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>, (accessed October 7, 2011).

Workers from all the South Asian countries.

For the Southeast Asian countries, South Asia is the second main source region and accounts for about 9 percent of the total stock of migrants in this region. For instance, in 2005, India accounted for 6.9 percent of all migrant workers in Malaysia, the third largest source for foreign labour in that country. As a single source region, South Asia (including Nepal) accounted for around 20 percent of all registered migrant workers in Malaysia in 2006. <sup>7</sup>

**Table 6: Migrant Workers Stock in Malaysia, 2011**

| Countries  | Maid  | Construction | Manufacturing | Services | Plantation | Agriculture |
|------------|-------|--------------|---------------|----------|------------|-------------|
| Bangladesh | 0.04  | 21.16        | 54.31         | 80.49    | 10.46      | 5.95        |
| Nepal      | 0.02  | 1.45         | 82.87         | 10.36    | 0.95       | 4.31        |
| India      | 0.57  | 4.3          | 6.52          | 44.17    | 20.30      | 7.15        |
| Sri Lanka  | 24.15 | 1.39         | 48.75         | 11.77    | 10.50      | 0.13        |

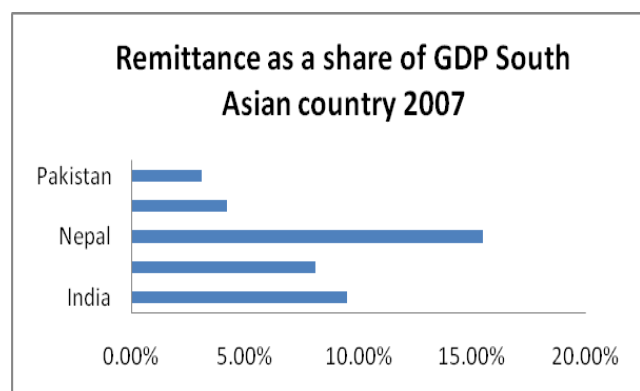
Source: Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia

Labour migrants from South Asia are mostly employed in agriculture, plantation, construction, domestic service, and manufacturing in Malaysia. Rural labour migrant from Bangladesh are engaged in plantations, construction sites, domestic service and unskilled factory work in Malaysia. Indians, who make up about 8 per cent of the two million registered foreign workers in Malaysia, mainly work in the plantation, construction, information technology and financial services industries in Malaysia. Sri Lanka is an important source for domestics in both Malaysia and Singapore. In recent years, there is also growing skilled migration from South Asia to these Southeast Asian countries, mainly in the IT, financial, engineering, and other professional services sectors.

**Impacts:**

**1. Remittance economy:** - As competition intensifies for foreign investment and overseas development assistance, the remittances of migrants are increasingly gaining in importance. Remittances are.

Considered to be larger and more stable than foreign direct investment and in some cases, larger even than official development aid. Remittances have also played a critical role in the local economic development and poverty reduction strategies; they lead to greater investment in education and health by recipient households and also to infrastructure development and investment.



Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators

**2. Changing nature of the labour market:** - In 2001-2002, Nepali labourers were only accepted by Malaysia and South Korea after Bangladeshi labourers were rejected. Although the shift in policy opened new opportunities for Nepali workers, it closed the door for migrant labourers from Bangladesh. Similarly, Iraq was one of the major labour absorbing market for Pakistan manpower up to 1990, but due to sanctions imposed on Iraq after the first Gulf War the labour market has never picked up to that level again

**3. Poverty alleviation:** - Comparable data on the relationship between migrant remittance and poverty alleviation for South Asia are not available, but the World Bank Global Economic Perspective Report (2006) notes that remittance inflow has made it possible for Bangladesh to cut poverty by 6 percent. In Nepal, a study done by the Nepal Living Standard Survey found that the contribution of remittances in reducing poverty between 1996 and 2003 was 11 percent.<sup>8</sup>

**4. Unemployment reduction:-**The migrants have indeed contributed to the development and prosperity all over the world. In fact in the initial stage of development when the local skilled and semi skilled labour force is absent the migration provides with job opportunity

For example the Indian workers working in srilanka, Bangladeshi and Nepalese working in India as domestic worker, watchmen etc.

#### Issues & challenges:

Most governments in South Asia have promoted out-migration through institutional support of recruitment and policy implementation. However, such promotional policies do not sufficiently protect the rights and interests of migrant workers and their families (Pong – Sul , 2005) . Therefore the challenges and issues are:

**1) Exploitation of migrant worker by the recruitment agency:** For instance, Amnesty International (2007) notes that agents charge hefty fees and commissions for placement in overseas jobs, for transport, accommodation, any training they provide, and for passport and work permit fees. Where unregistered agents are involved, the fees charged tend to be higher. South Asian migrants also face problems due to multiple levels of recruiters and brokers who often misinform about the real terms and conditions of employment and even cheat them.

**2) Women trafficking:** - After Southeast Asia, South Asia is the home to largest number of internationally trafficked persons, which is estimated to be around 150,000 annually. India and Pakistan are major countries of destination for trafficked women and girls, and are also the main transit points into the Middle East. Trafficking is an integral offshoot of the need for outmigration in Nepal. Organizations working on trafficking issues estimate that thousands of women and children are trafficked each year out of Nepal into neighboring countries, primarily to India. It is also estimated that close to 200,000 women and girls from Nepal are working under mostly oppressive conditions in the various red light areas of Indian cities

**3) Illegal migration:** - Illegal migration has grown rapidly and affects many countries in the region. Up to one in four migrant workers in South Asia may have illegal status according to ILO. Labor flows from Bangladesh to India have been largely illegal, as have the movements of Thai workers to Malaysia and other countries. Thailand itself hosts up to 1.7 million illegal workers, mainly from Burma, according to the International Organization for Migration.

**4) Sexual exploitation:-** Sexual exploitation is one of the major health concern of trafficked women and girls. Upgrowing of the Sex industry in India, accounts for two and half million women (Razia, 2014) actively involved and more than 5 million people found HIV positive.

According to SAIF(2016) Migrant women workers from socially and economically more vulnerable communities are also more likely to fall prey to exploitation by recruitment intermediaries, traffickers and employers. These women have comparatively fewer options for employment and may therefore be willing to take more significant risks to meet their personal and family needs. They may also have fewer networks and less information to guide them in their migration processes.

**5) Changing nature of the labour market:** - In 2001-2002, Nepali labourers were only accepted by Malaysia and South Korea after Bangladeshi labourers was rejected. Although the shift in policy opened new opportunities for Nepali workers, it closed the door for migrant labourers from Bangladesh. Similarly, Iraq was one of the major labour absorbing market for Pakistan manpower up to 1990, but due to sanctions imposed on Iraq after the first Gulf War the labour market has never picked up to that level again

**Suggested solutions:**

1. The recruitment agencies play a very crucial role in the migration process. The governments should monitor the role and activities of these agencies. Laws that are in place for monitoring these agencies and penalizing them should be updated so that they are operationalised. There should be a Code of Conduct for the recruiting agencies.
2. Foreign employment promotion should be done for taking advantage of regional and global employment opportunities and bring in foreign exchange.
3. Promoting Safe Migration: Safe migration should include dealing with the threat of HIV/AIDS, because the disease ignores national boundaries and spreads from nation to nation. Initiatives to ensure safe migration should address specific problems by reducing vulnerability of migrant workers through proper orientation; providing access to prevention, treatment, and care in both sources and destination countries;
4. NGOS should play a role. They should primarily involve in awareness campaigns on safe migration and pre departure information. Studies on women laborers working in the Middle East have found that with better predeparture training they have been able to work more easily with their employers. As a result of this training, verbal and physical abuses also have dropped significantly (Siddqui 2007c).
5. The Governments in South Asia and in ASEAN need to recognize the need for enhancing their institutional building capacity and formulate strategies and policies to

Harness the positive impacts of out-migration and to achieve the goals of overseas employment, gender equality and protection.

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