

Livelihood in A Long Distance: Complexities and Challenges of South Asian Expatriates in Middle East

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South Asia has emerged as a significant source of migrant workers for countries around the world, especially in the Middle East. It is one of the rapidly growing regions that is becoming increasingly important in global politics and economic activity. This region is home to eight countries- Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka¹. Despite its historical and cultural importance, the region faces significant economic challenges, with an underdeveloped labor market and high unemployment rates. As a result, many citizens from South Asian countries look for job opportunities abroad to improve their living conditions. One of the most attractive destinations for South Asian migrant workers is the Middle East, where there is high demand for labor, especially for low or unskilled workers. There are several factors contributing to the high flow of labor migration from South Asia to other parts of the world, including individual, domestic, international, and supranational factors. Exploring the complexities and challenges of migrant workers could provide us an insightful summary of how an individual migrant has to face hardships like procedural complexity, work-life balance, and challenging work environment at different level and how those hardships impact on their personal and social life.

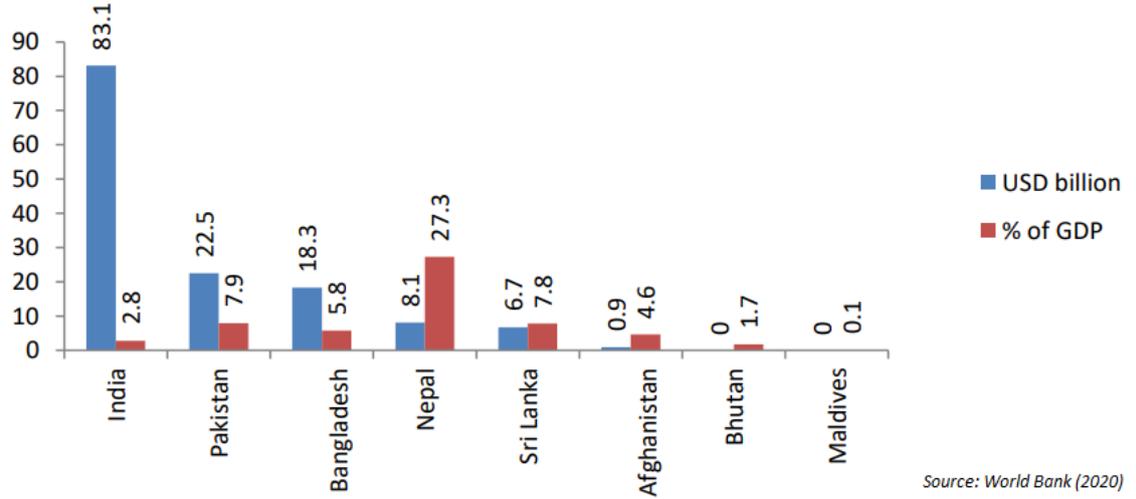
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Expatriates in Middle East

Middle Eastern countries are the most attractive work destinations for migrant workers from South Asia and one of the highest sources of income of foreign remittances for the countries in the regionⁱⁱ. There are about 30 million migrantsⁱⁱⁱ working in the Arab Gulf states – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. About 80% of these are employed in low-paid sectors such as construction, hospitality and domestic work, and come from poorer countries in Asia and Africa. In fact, four South Asian countries^{iv} featured in the world's top-20 countries of origin of international migrants in 2017, including India (first), Bangladesh (fifth), Pakistan (seventh) and Afghanistan (eleventh). Consequently, South Asia has become one of the major sources of labor migration in the middle east. Consequently, as many as 10,000 migrant workers from south and south-east Asia die^v every year in the Gulf countries, according to a report by a group of human rights organizations.

Remittances to South Asia (Total)



Reasons behind South Asian labor migration

According to the World Economic Forum^{vi}, two key factors play significant role behind the labor migration of this region. One is pull-factors that attract people to migrate to their destination countries, like for better education, higher living standards, and employment benefits. The other one is push-factors that refers to challenging situations like war, political violence and repression, poverty, and so on and so forth that pressure or force people to leave their own country to find a safe and more secured life and livelihood. The most common factors that push the people in the region to migrate are lack of job opportunity, poverty, political instability, and natural disaster. Furthermore, some factors can also be categorized as country-specific like the climate change in Bangladesh and Maldives, civil war in Sri Lanka, social discrimination and religious violence in India, and high inflation in Pakistan etc. Moreover, the pull factors include high wages, secure livelihood, affordable health service and social influence^{vii}. Although these causes of labor migration indicate various windows of opportunities and scopes for the problem-stricken people, the plight of the labor in many countries specially in the Middle East and other rich countries are well known because of worldwide media coverage and active role of international human rights organizations^{viii}.

Procedural complexities for migrant workers

The procedural part for the labor migration is also not out of question because the process of going abroad is not so smooth. It is hard for the prospective abroad labor market candidates to find the right agencies that provide authentic and necessary information about the job environment, working hours and most importantly the salary and other employment benefits. A World Bank report^x offers recommendations on de-risking migration through different means such as more flexible visa policies, mechanisms to support migrant workers during shocks, and social protection programs. Without them, the life of an immigrant workers in abroad is so hard. Generally, the south Asian workers in abroad are exploited in many ways. Specifically, the low and unskilled workers are most vulnerable group to the exploitation in a workplace which is totally unknown to them. One of the key reasons behind this kind exploitation is that these low and unskilled workers have a little education and, in most of the cases, no training. As a result, many of them

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hold temporary jobs in informal sectors, face adversities related with insecure labor market conditions, visa issue and inadequate social safety^x.

Social life of a migrant worker

Social life of immigrant workers in both own and host countries is not up to the mark. They face difficulties and barriers in every sphere of their lives. In their workplace, the daily routine of them is to fulfill the target of scheduled works which are assigned by their employers. They hardly get leisure time to relax or have fun with other workers or family members. Immigrant workers are sometimes treated like a third-class people or even like a slave. As a result, immigrant workers are socially inactive. In the own country, remittances they send may alleviate the immediate poverty of migrant workers and members of their families, but the social costs associated with migration have significant impact on the psycho-social well-being of family members, particularly children^{xi}. They might sometimes find their conjugal life is at stake due to lack of physical interaction between the spouses, which is very important according to the mental health experts.

Family life of a migrant worker

The average working duration^{xii} of worldwide immigrants is 15 and over. The scenario of south Asian immigrant is not different. They spend most of their lives in different host countries leaving family behind. As a result, their family life and biological intimacy is denied. So, family life of immigrant workers is significantly poor and nonfunctional since they live in distance countries. Most international migrants take up 2 to 3-year employment contracts overseas^{xiii} that allow them to reside in destination countries where many migrants pursue and complete successive contracts for continuing their work that cover a much longer time period. There is very less physical interaction among the family members. As a result, they suffer from psycho-social well-being and anxiety^{xiv}. Even in the case of medical emergency of children or elderly members of the family, immigrant workers cannot help their family which makes both the parties of immigrant persons as well family members sad. In addition, the children of their family do not get proper care and quality education.

Misery in workstations

There are various aspects of living as immigrant workers abroad and it depends on the destination countries' legal and institutional protection for the migrant workers, be it formal or informal sector. Due to mostly become the sender with dire economic and social crises and lack of strong institutional arrangements, the South Asian countries often fail to protect their citizen in labor market abroad. The destination countries have upper hand over the sender countries in the labor rights negotiations due to absence of proper diplomatic and bilateral resolutions. The South Asian countries are criticized to be apathetic to the protection of their migrant workers, while being highly benefited by the remittances they send. These countries more interested in stimulating the inflow of remittances, rather than caring for the hapless workers behind this inflow. For instance, if the immigrant workers face any kind of hostility in the workplace, they do not receive any quick remedy for fixing their problems.

On the other hand, lack of proper training and poor educational qualification are main reasons for the sufferings of immigrant workers. As they are non-skilled workers, so they do not get standard job with handsome salary. Due to lack of skill, they must work at a minimum wage which leads to a vulnerable life. Like shortage of nutritious food, anxiety, disorder and physical weakness. Likewise, most of the immigrant workers in many of the cases suffer from poverty driven diseases like dementia and male nutrition.

Way forward: some policy proposals

People are inherently tended to pursue the betterment of their life, and so for their families. The debate over living standards and its implications on social welfare and economy reflects on why it remains one of the very important agenda in societies. South Asian people have a significant struggle for their economic stability and sustainability in order to ensure a safe and secured life. Pursuing better employment and sustenance is a common journey for a person's life in the region. In South Asia, policies are needed to promote better governance of migrant workers' recruitment and their protection to ensure decent work, social protection, and portability of social security entitlements^{xv}. Administrative structure for the welfare of the immigrant workers of nearly all south Asian countries is poor. There is no pension scheme for the immigrant workers. In many cases, when an immigrant worker come back to their own country from the foreign workstations, he or she has happened to be found themselves with no money left to bear his future expenditure. Not only that they have to face the worst situation, if they have no land in their own name or

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any deposit in the bank. For example, surveys have reported stigma and discrimination of returnees in their own communities and families because they returned in a situation like COVID-19 pandemic context with hardly any savings, high debt burdens, and some may have experienced traumatic situations^{xvi} and forced return from destination countries. The person who spent his whole life in abroad for the betterment of the family and country, at the end he is treated as burden. The government should take initiatives and other necessary steps to launch the pension scheme for the immigrant workers so that they can like their own after retirement from the job. Moreover, all the mentioned south Asian countries are member states of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which could work for regional policy regarding labor migration. Though in 2014 labor migration was recognized as a regional policy during 18th summit^{xvii}, it became a missed opportunity later for various issues.



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