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Return and Reintegration without Assimilation: South Asian Migrant Workers in the Gulf during COVID-19

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Summary

Temporary labour migration and related remittances are integral components of the South Asian economies. A significant portion of labour migrants from this region head to the Gulf countries. Nevertheless, migrant workers to the Gulf are barred from formally integrating into the socio-economic context in their country of destination. In this context, using the case of the Kuwait Amnesty and other examples during COVID-19 pademic, this paper reflects on the disproportionate division of responsibilities between the South Asian and Gulf countries in terms of the assimilation, return and reintegration of migrant workers, in an attempt to improve the well-being of migrant workers through the frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Introduction

The great shutdowns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to have economic consequences far more severe than those of previous global economic downturns. While all economies are struggling to face COVID-19-related challenges and manage the situation with minimum negative impact, employers and governments are searching for ways to protect their workers. Nevertheless, migrant workers are a special group of employees which is often not covered by the general protective measures extended by employers and governments in the countries in which they are employed. As such, regions such as South Asia – popular for sending migrant workers to the Gulf and highly dependent on migrant labour – are struggling to protect these workers during the pandemic.

This paper aims to reflect on the disproportionate division of responsibilities between the South Asian and Gulf countries in terms of the assimilation of migrant workers, their return and reintegration, and how this affects their well-being during the pandemic.

Migration and Remittances

Temporary labour migration is an integral component of the South Asian economies. In 2019, about a third (approximately 36 million) of all international migrants worldwide (112 million) were born in the South Asian countries. Within the region, India had the largest stock of about 17.5 million migrants abroad while Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan were in the sixth, seventh and tenth places respectively (IOM, 2019). In 2019, a total of 203,186 migrant workers left Sri Lanka, while labour migration from Bangladesh in 2018 was 734,181. The total worker departures from Pakistan in 2018 were 382,439, while during the period of 2016/17, a total of 382,871 migrant workers left Nepal. The departures from India in 2017 were 391,024 (see Table 1).

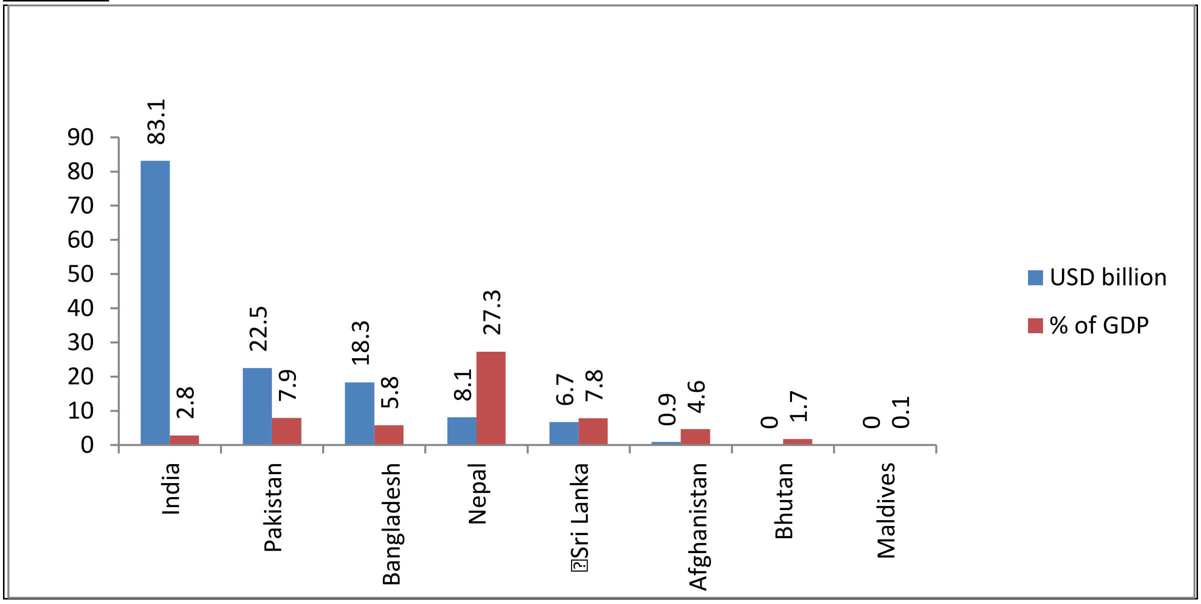
Table 1: Migrant worker departures from South Asia

Country	Period	Departures
Sri Lanka	2019	203,186
Bangladesh	2018	734,181
India	2017	391,024
Pakistan	2018	382,439
Nepal	2016/17	382,871

Source: CBSL (2019); Siddiqui, Sultana, Sultana, & Akhter (2019); ILO (2018); and IOM (2019).

Most of these labour migrants from South Asia depart as temporary migrant workers, leaving their families behind. As such, while a significant number leave South Asian countries, there is a corresponding inward flow of remittances. In 2019, total remittances to South Asia was about US$140 billion (SG$195 billion) which was about 20 per cent of the total global remittances of US$714 billion (SG$994 billion). The largest share of remittances in South Asia was received by India, which was US$83.1 billion (SG$115.7 billion), followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh, which received US$22.5 billion (S$31.3 billion) and US$18.3 billion (S$25.4 billion), respectively. In Nepal's case, the remittances amounted to US$8.1 billion (S$11.2 billion) and accounted for 27.3 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP), while in Sri Lanka, remittances accounted for 7.8 per cent of its GDP (World Bank, 2020). As such, labour migration and remittances are an integral part of the South Asian economies.

Figure 1: Remittances to South Asia



Source: World Bank (2020).

Destinations in the Gulf Cooperation Council

Among labour migrants from the South Asian region, a significant portion head to the Middle East, or more specifically, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region. For instance, in 2017, over 550,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers went to Saudi Arabia, while over 150,000 Indian migrant workers and over 275,000 Pakistani migrant workers went to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (ILO (b), 2018; ILO (a), 2018). In 2016/17, over 120,000 Nepali migrant workers left for employment in Qatar. In the case of Sri Lanka, in 2018, Qatar was the most popular destination among departing migrant workers (50,774), while in 2019, the top destination was Kuwait (43,089) (CBSL, 2019)). As such, the GCC countries are among the top five destination countries of migrant workers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The Middle East has become a favoured destination for South Asian temporary labour migrants due to the massive demand for foreign labour. As noted by the World Bank in 2018, the growth in these oil-exporting countries has regularly relied on the large inflows of foreign labour to transform their economies and increase their income levels. By 2010, in the Middle East, on average, there are two immigrants for every three native-born people (World Bank, 2018). Moreover, in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, the immigrant-to-population ratio reached over 75 per cent in 2010, where three out of every four people are foreign born (The World Bank, 2018, pp. 42-43).

Non-assimilation Policies in the Gulf

With the Gulf countries' heavy reliance on migrant workers for their economic prosperity, one would expect that, over the years, migrant workers would have assimilated well to the local context. However, in reality, the Gulf countries have over time crafted a migration management system termed the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which limits the assimilation of migrant workers. This *kafala* system is embedded with two very critical policy stances for international migration which are protectionism and the absence of pathways for integrating immigrants into society (Rahman, 2018). For instance, in the case of the UAE, immigration is formally defined as temporary (Valenta, Knowlto, Jakobsen, Awad, & Strabac, 2019) while in Saudi Arabia, the social integration of migrants is prohibited by specifying that foreign workers cannot marry or have sexual relationships with locals. Elsewhere, certain policies deter family reunions and the long-term settlement of migrant workers (Rahman, 2018). As the World Bank (2018, p. 24) underscores, "certain destination countries actively discourage integration by providing no pathway to permanence" under the premise that "non-assimilated migrants are more likely to leave once their employment is concluded."

As such, migrant workers to the Gulf are barred from formally integrating into the socioeconomic context in their country of destination. Moreover, the dual labour markets in the Gulf countries pave the path for nationals to receive public sector jobs while foreign workers are hired mainly for employment in the private sector. As such, regardless of the costs borne by migrant workers or their desire to remain in their countries of destination, labour migration to Gulf region is almost always formally temporary. As a consequence, the Gulf countries detach themselves from any responsibility of integrating or assimilating migrant workers. In this context, temporary labour migrants to the Gulf are in a unique situation where they are neither fully in their countries of destination nor in their countries of origin.

The Global Financial Crisis in 2009

The 2009 global financial crisis was a clear example of the Gulf countries flexing their muscles by not assimilating migrant workers and adjusting their labour markets to a similarly adverse and ongoing economic situation. During the financial crisis, migrant workers were disproportionately affected compared to native born workers. Specifically, in the case of the Gulf region, the dichotomous labour market meant that migrants were concentrated in private sector jobs while natives were concentrated in public sector jobs. With this dichotomy, the negative implications of the financial crisis were easily channeled to the private sector, and the impact of the decline in employment was mainly felt by migrant workers rather than citizens. Moreover, the private industries most affected by the downturn, such as construction, mainly employed foreign workers.

Similarly, these countries of destination also adopted measures to contract the stock of migrants workers, such as reducing admission quotas and freezing the issuance of work permits to limit labour inflow as well as by discouraging workers already present through measures such as non-extension of work visas; layoffs; redeployment; raising levies and stiffer sanctions on workers and employers; stricter enforcement of immigration laws; stringent apprehensions, detentions, and deportations; and voluntary and enforced return measures.

As such, the Carnigie Endowment for International Peace (2009) aptly underscored that the region "exported much of its unemployment to countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, minimising the social and political unrest that could be caused by job losses among nationals."

COVID-19 Experience

Similar to the previous global downturns, the implications of the great shutdowns in this COVID-19 era are expected to severely affect migrant workers. Estimates by the World Bank indicate a contraction in the Middle East and North Africa region by 1.8 per cent, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates a 2.7 per cent decline (World Bank, 2020; IMF, 2020). Moreover, as noted by the World Bank, "when viewed through a migration lens, the economic crisis induced by COVID-19 could be even longer, deeper, and more pervasive than these estimates imply" (World Bank, 2020, p. 9). The COVID-19 crisis has added issues to sectors in the countries of destination that depend on migrant workers, such as food and hospitality, retail and wholesale, tourism and transport, and manufacturing (World Bank, 2020). As such, from an employment point of view, COVID-19 has resulted in unemployment, underemployment, lower wages, cuts in benefits and non-payment of wages. For instance, in Oman, when some Indian migrant workers were laid off, 70 per cent of their gratuity was to be dispensed immediately while the balance was to be given when the migrant workers were able to return home, with a nominal amount promised for their survival till departure (Kuttappan, 2020). At the same time, some Indian migrant workers in Qatar were told to "give up the end of service benefits and return home" while a Sri Lankan migrant worker in the UAE experienced a 50 per cent salary cut in April 2020 and 60 per cent cut in May 2020, reducing his monthly salary of 1,600 dirhams (S$608) to 640 dirhams (S$243) (Kuttappan, 2020; Gunadasa, 2020). Moreover, in some Gulf countries, nationalisation sentiments are emerging to the detriment of migrant workers. For instance, Omani authorities have barred private companies from laying off natives while urging the layoff of migrant workers. Concurrently, Kuwaiti politicians are proposing for the the contracts of migrant workers to not be renewed unless the post is advertised for application by Kuwaitis (Kuttappan, 2020; ZAWYA, 2020).

With limited assimilation opportunities, the COVID-19 crisis has triggered the need for a large number of South Asian migrant workers to return to their countries of origin. For example, nearly 21,000 Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East have contacted Sri Lankan authorities for their repatriation while over 150,000 Indian workers in the UAE have registered to return to India (MFA, 2020; The Hindu, 2020). Similarly, Bangladesh has been under pressure to repatriate its migrant workers from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait, while Nepal expects about 100,000 returnees mainly from the Gulf and Malaysia (Uttom, 2020; Banerji, Devasia, & Sharma, 2020).

While some developments in the Gulf countries negatively contributed towards the well-being of the migrant workers and their expedited return, there are also sporadic efforts that contributed otherwise. For instance, “the Qatari government is providing free health care to migrant workers affected by the COVID-19 virus in the Doha Industrial Area” (World Bank, 2020, p. 16), and in UAE, employers are required to provide migrant workers with accommodation until they leave or are permitted to work for another party. Similarly, UAE migrant workers’ residence permits expiring on 1 March 2020 are to be extended for three months without any additional fees (Nammour, 2020; John, 2020). At the same time, Gulf governments such as those in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have allowed employers and employees to mutually agree to reduce working hours, cut wages, utilise unpaid leave or use their annual leave during this period to facilitate the preservation of jobs in the long run (Arab News, 2020; Ministry of Administrative development, Labour and Social Affairs, 2020; Salama, 2020).

Whilst the full extent of the impact of the pandemic on temporary migrant workers in the Middle East remains to be seen, the complications due to the minimal responsibility assumed by countries of destination in terms of assimilation of migrant workers are already emerging. The case of Kuwaiti Amnesty during the spread of COVID-19 exemplifies some aspect of this disproportionate division of responsibilities between countries of destination and origin.

Kuwaiti Amnesty in 2020

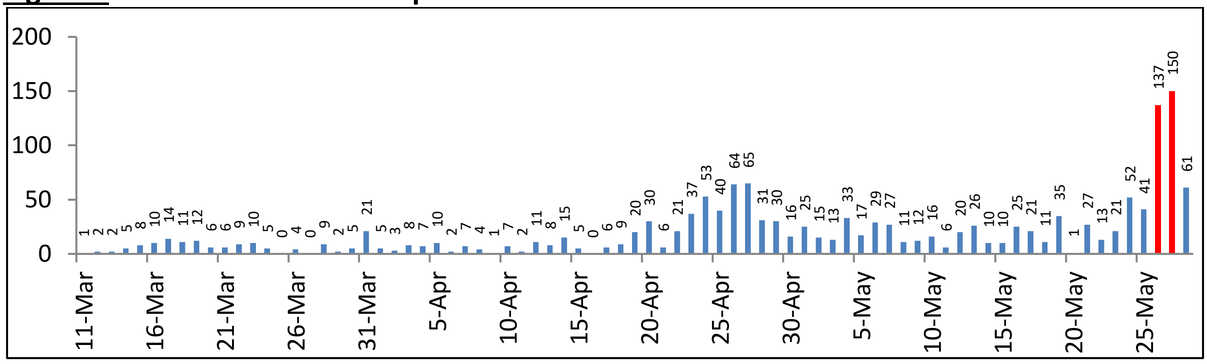
The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic led the Kuwaiti government to declare an amnesty from 1 to 30 April 2020, where irregular migrant workers in the country would be allowed to leave. Under this amnesty, migrants who have overstayed their visas or are otherwise undocumented in Kuwait and do not have a ban on departure (due to outstanding bills or legal cases) are allowed to apply. The amnesty also allows such migrants to leave Kuwait without paying any fines. Most importantly, the amnesty provides the possibility for these migrants to return in the future with the appropriate documents. To make the deal even more attractive, the Kuwaiti government is prepared to pay for most repatriation flights via Kuwait Airways. Overall, the amnesty is considered to be well-organised. For example, “workers are bused into a one-stop centre where all their paperwork is processed on the same day. They are provided temporary shelter and food while they wait” (Migrant-Rights.Org, 2020). This processing was carried out by nationality; for instance, Bangladesh was allocated 11 to 15 April 2020; India 16 to 20 April 2020; and Sri Lanka 21 to 25 April 2020. The Kuwaiti amnesty is expected to benefit thousands of South Asian migrant workers.

Nevertheless, before the commencement of the evacuation under this amnesty, it was feared that despite being attractive, the amnesty posed risks associated with mass repatriation during the pandemic by not fully addressing certain health concerns. Specifically, the absence of pre-departure testing of applicants raises concerns about the spreading of COVID-19 in the migrants' countries of origin (Migrant-Rights.Org, 2020). As proof of these concerns, it is now reported that migrants in holding centres awaiting evacuation are at high risk of contracting COVID-19. The workers who volunteered themselves for the amnesty to the Kuwaiti authorities are reported to be held in detention centres which lack capacity for social distancing and safe and hygienic sanitary facilities (Ullah, 2020).

Disproportionate Responsibility

As a confirmation of these fears, the repatriation of undocumented migrant workers from Kuwait to Sri Lanka resulted in a partial reversal of the successful efforts made in Sri Lanka to curtail the spread of the pandemic. The repatriation of migrant workers from Kuwait to Sri Lanka started on 19 May 2020 with the arrival of 466 returnees, consisting of 379 migrant workers under the amnesty and another 87 from detention centres and prisons (MFA, 2020). Subsequently, the controlled nature of the spread of the virus in Sri Lanka took a different turn with a spike in the number of reported COVID-19 cases with the repatriation of Kuwaiti amnesty recipients. Specifically, on 26 May 2020, 127 out of 137 cases reported were those repatriated from Kuwait (Ada Derana, 2020). Similarly, on 27 May 2020, out of the 150 reported patients, 92 were returnees from Kuwait (Lanka News Web, 2020).

Figure 2: Number of COVID-19 patients in Sri Lanka



Source : https://epid.gov.lk/web/images/pdf/corona_virus_report/sitrep-sl-en-29-05_10.pdf

Prior to the commencement of evacuation missions on 19 May 2020 by the Kuwait authorities, the Sri Lankan authorities on 11 and 14 May 2020 requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait to conduct PCR tests on those being repatriated. The Kuwaiti authorities informed the Sri Lankan authorities that "this would not be possible and that no passenger with COVID symptoms would be allowed to board the aircraft." Further highlighting the lower level of responsibility of the Middle Eastern countries of destination, the Kuwaiti authorities "stated that PCR tests had not been done on any of the returnees from other countries leaving Kuwait" (MFA, 2020). Similarly, half of those returning from the UAE to Pakistan had tested positive for COVID-19 and it is also reported that Pakistani authorities are also seeking greater responsibility from the country of destination regarding the health concerns of returnees (Batta, 2020). The revelation of the disproportionate health burden of returning migrant workers on the country of origin destabilised Sri Lanka's repatriation efforts, resulting in the cancellation of a repatriation flight scheduled to bring Sri Lankan migrant workers home from Qatar on 25 May 2020 (MFA (b), 2020).

In addition to health care concerns, the migrant workers' unemployed status adds to the already struggling labour markets in the South Asian economies. Banerji, Devasia, and Sharma (2020) highlight that the influx of so many returning workers "threaten to overwhelm fragile public health systems and a dwindling jobs market in the region, which is home to a fifth of the world's population." The struggling labour markets in some of these countries of origin are aptly highlighted by Hayashi and Matsuda (2020). Specifically, taking online job postings as a proxy for the labour market condition, Hayashi and Matsuda (2020) show that compared to the same period in 2019, job posting in March 2020 declined by 35 per cent, and in Bangladesh in April 2020 by 87 per cent, while in the case of Sri Lanka, the decline in March 2020 was 27 per cent and 70 per cent in April 2020. In India, the unemployment rate has increased from 8.8 per cent in March 2020 to 23.5 per cent in April 2020 and 24 per cent in May 2020 (Vyas, 2020).

Despite worsening labour market conditions in the South Asian economies, they do not have an analogous capacity to *export their unemployment to the rest of world*; instead, they must absorb the unemployment of their nationals in the Middle East. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) notes (IOM 2019, p. 271) such disproportionate responsibility falls on the countries of origin when the countries of destination do not prioritise the needs and safety of migrant populations. From the point of view of the country of origin, such "returns can challenge the absorption capacity and resilience of households, communities and societies in the country of origin" (IOM 2019, p. 278).

As is evident from the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to handle it, migrant-specific crisis response measures in the Gulf region countries of destination "have focused primarily on returning migrants to their countries of origin", which, as aptly foretold by the IOM (2019, p. 271) has exemplified a focus that "can come at the expense of other effective support mechanisms that may better meet migrants' immediate post-crisis recovery and longer-term interests and needs."

Rebalancing Assimilation, Return and Reintegration

As demonstrated, the commitment of the Gulf countries of destination toward migrant workers appears to be limited to their labour market transaction. Nevertheless, unlike the trading market for commodities, the labour market requires added protections and safeguards for workers. However, over the years, the countries of origin have had limited success in addressing these issues bilaterally. In order to get countries of destination to accept a stronger commitment to the plight of migrant workers, a larger voice needs to be raised.

Currently, there are two main development frameworks related to improving the plight of migrant workers which can be harnessed to rebalance issues associated with assimilation, return and reintegration of South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf. The Agenda 2030 and its broad based Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) can be applied to migrant workers. Such applicable goals include Goal 2, Zero Hunger; Goal 3, Good Health and Wellbeing; Goal 6, Clean Water and Sanitisation; Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic growth; Goal 10, Reducing Inequality; and Goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, to name a few. Similarly, the more recent Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) was developed in 2018 to be consistent with target 10.7 of the SDGs, in which United Nations member states committed to cooperate internationally to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration.

Within the GCM framework, assimilation issues of migrant workers in Gulf countries of destination can be addressed through objectives 16 and 2. Aspects of this objective focus on empowering migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion, and underscore that countries of destination should commit to fostering inclusive and cohesive societies by empowering migrants to become active society members and by promoting reciprocal engagement by receiving communities also in the exercise of mutual rights and obligations. The emerging empirical evidence on the challenges faced by migrant workers and their countries of origin on return and reintegration in the absence of adequate assimilation should be factored into reshaping this objective and its related implementation. Similarly, Objective 2 of the GCM highlights that during natural disasters, sustainable outcomes have to be promoted by "taking into account the capacities of all countries involved."

As such, the governance framework of the GCM can be harnessed towards addressing the disproportionate division of responsibility towards South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf and to improving their assimilation in the countries of destination, thereby ensuring more successful and efficient implementation of return and reintegration efforts by the countries of origin.

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