

Policy Brief (July, 2020)

**South Asian Migration during COVID-19
Pandemic: Perspectives from India, Nepal,
Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives**

South Asian Migration during COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migration has been an essential element of the South Asian region, whether in terms of intra-regional migration or extra-regional migration since time immemorial. It has been observed over time that migration helps in the economic upliftment of the migrants. However, South Asia has been facing long-standing issues like poverty, illiteracy, corruption and ill-health. Moreover, by posing an unprecedented global health crisis, COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these vulnerabilities in an unprecedented manner. However, among all the vulnerable groups, migrants and immigrants are facing tremendous adversities due to various reasons, including forced migration, discriminatory attitude, insensitive behaviour of employers, wage theft, lack of policy-coordination among home countries, transit countries and host countries. Various incidents of discrimination, corruption, xenophobia are being reported in the South Asian region. Moreover, the coronavirus outbreak and subsequent shutdown is causing economic downfall and has started to affect remittances adversely in the South Asian region.

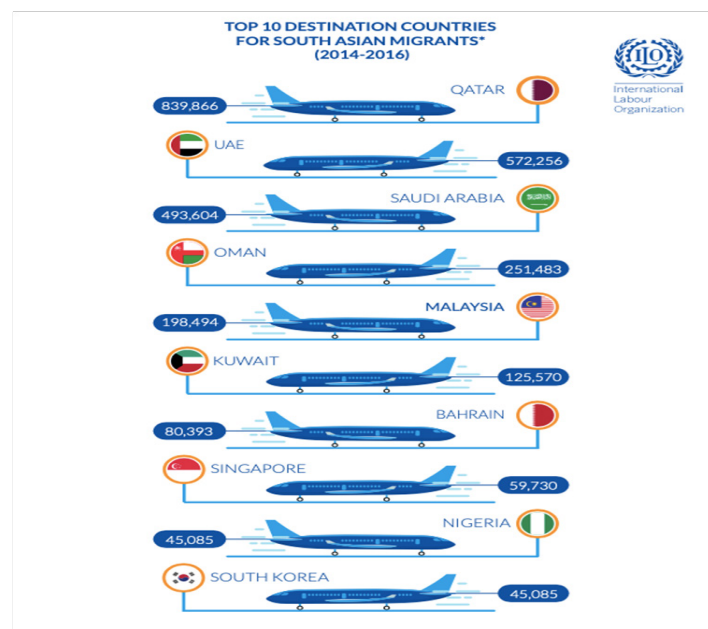
To discuss and contemplate over these pertinent issues relating to migration during COVID-19 pandemic, the School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies (SOITS), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, organised the International Webinar titled “South Asian Migration during COVID-19 Pandemic: Issues and Challenges,” on July 10, 2020, to commemorate World Population Day (July 11, 2020). The webinar had representation from various South Asian countries including Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

The policy brief suggests the following key recommendations for various stakeholders: a). Need for Skill Mapping of returnee migrants by respective governments; b). Sectoral identification for mass employment of South Asian migrants; c). Strict compliance of Pre-departure orientation programmes for outgoing workers; d). Countermeasures for removing the stigmatisation related to returnee migrants; e). De-securitisation of migration to overcome various forms of discrimination; f). Need for a common platform for South Asian countries to espouse the cause of migrant workers’

rights; g). Need for a joint mechanism by South Asian countries to raise voices opposing discrimination against migrants in the Gulf countries; h). Reintegration policies need to be framed by South Asian countries; i). Seeking the help of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to resolve the unpaid wages of migrant workers; j). Empowering Diasporic Organisations to help migrant workers cope up the pandemic

BACKGROUND

Movement of migrants is an ongoing characteristic of the South Asian region, and the migration process impacts the lives of migrants often in uncertain ways. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand the mobility patterns and issues associated with it to formulate better policies, which can address the grievances of migrants timely.



Source: (International Labour Organization, 2018, p. 42). International labour migration statistics in South Asia: Establishing a subregional database and improving data collection for evidence-based policy-making. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

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The above ILO produced image provides the list of top ten destination countries for South Asian migrants from 2014 to 2016, which indicates that GCC countries dominate as a destination choice for South Asian migrant workers.

On the paucity of data availability and data-sharing in the South Asian region, SAARC Plan of Action on Labour Migration, Kathmandu (2016) mentions that “it has become essential/imperative to improve... data collection and data sharing on issues relating to migration trends and patterns, including return migration. To the extent possible, the data should be disaggregated according to gender, sector and skill levels, with a view to strengthening evidence-based policies” (International Labour Organization, 2018, p. 5). There are multiple perspectives from various countries of South Asia, which need to be taken to account for policy-coordination. Therefore, this policy brief attempts to bring diverse country perspectives on labour migration in South Asia and the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the socio-economic conditions of migrant workers and its subsequent repercussions.

1. Right kind of data of migrants starting from Panchayat level will help in reviving and stimulating the growth of India

Prof. Kshiti Bhusan Das argued that the process of migration has been in existence since prehistoric years and has always been voluntary from Indian side except during the British days. South Asia region has been one of the largest migrants sending region in the world. South Asian economy is closely integrated with the global supply and demand of human capital for at least four decades. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge to the migrants in general and international migrants in particular. As a consequence, it has adversely impacted the migrant family, the state economy and sustainable development in general. Educated and skilled workers are comparatively better in terms of economic conditions. However, there is a widespread concern over the plight of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers as they are more vulnerable and lack resources, especially during such pandemic.

Prof. Das emphasised the contribution of migrants in the development of home, host and transit countries by productively engaging in economies and in contributing to revenues. Contribution of Kerala, specifically in the global health sector and contribution of Punjab, specifically in the global agriculture sector, has received worldwide appreciation. He mentions that as per the 2019 World Bank report of 2019, India received 83.1 billion \$, Pakistan 22.2 billion \$, Bangladesh 18.3 billion \$, Nepal 8.1 billion \$, Sri Lanka 6.7 billion \$, Afghanistan 0.9 billion \$. Moreover, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) has proposed the holistic and sustainable measures for migrants.

Prof. Das mentioned the example of 2008 World Economic Crisis, where India successfully managed its economy with the immense contribution of its highly qualified students and young talented IT professionals, doctors, nurses and engineers, who helped in terms of remittances. He acknowledged and appreciated the contribution of migrants in the growth and prosperity of nations across the world. However, a challenge has emerged in the origin countries, including India, due to the return of migrants for reasons like the job loss and safety of life. Government of India successfully brought back almost five lakhs migrants safely under the Vande Bharat Mission in two months. However, the challenge of integration has emerged due to return migration. In addition to it, many sectors of the economy have already been hit due to the pandemic and will have to be revived to generate employment.

Skill mapping of returnee migrant workers is essential to provide them with job opportunities: Prof. Kshiti Bhusan Das

According to Prof. Das, the challenge is to recuperate the loss in terms of remittances, which was helping the economy of India. The right kind of data from the level of Panchayat level by analysing the status of returning migrants and their job skills. He appreciated the vision of Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, about the Atmanirbhar Bharat, which envisions to bring a solution to the crisis of integration and return migration by creating more sustainable employment and enterprise in the home countries and states. The Indian Government has started measures to revive the MSME sector by steps like liberal finance. Agriculture-value chain including food processing, fishing, animal husbandry, herbal farming and many more skills have been announced with many support mechanisms.

The world is witnessing a shift in the global supply chain. Global supply chain destination will likely shift from China to South Asian countries, and India will be a big recipient of it. Those who are returning from abroad have required experience, exposure and expertise, especially in the fields like healthcare, tourism, financial and retail sectors. Therefore, it has to be seen how commercial establishments involve these migrants in research and development. Dedicated cells are needed to monitor the initiatives and schemes. Still, there is a challenge to India and the whole South Asian region to identify sectors which can ensure mass employment. Sectors like agriculture, industries, education and service will have to play a critical role in fulfilling the employment demands. There is a need for sensitisation over the issues of migrants by academia and policy-makers.

2. Migrants also need to be considered truly empowered rather than being often considered as vulnerable people

Mr. Shabari Nair suggested finding commonalities in differences within South Asia to make a better world and argues that migration is one of the most crucial processes which binds us together. On July 11, 1987, the United Nations recognised the Day of Five Billion, which marked the beginning of the World Population Day to impart awareness amongst the masses about the global population issues. Now, the world is standing at 7.8 billion population. The global blueprint for the world prosperity has to be seen through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formulated in 2015 after the global consultation of 193 countries.

Mr. Nair suggests that the welfare policies for the population have to be discussed at four different levels- ageing, urbanisation, low-fertility and migration. These four core areas form Population Dynamics.

The idea of the migration was first seen in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) plan of action 1994, which is now called as Cairo Plan of Action. It is most likely that in the coming twenty years, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), ratified in 2018 will be considered as the Marrakesh Plan of Action or Morocco Action Plan.

152 countries have endorsed the GCM framework and such global perspectives have to be translated in the South Asian region: Mr. Shabari Nair

As per the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), there are 272 million migrants. As per the global estimate of ILO, 164 million migrant workers are there across the globe. Within 164 million migrant workers, South Asia contributes almost 50 million, means almost close to one-third of the total migrant population has origin in South Asia. It reveals that South Asia has become one of the biggest hot-spot for labour migration. He further suggested that these 50 million migrants have to be seen comprehensively, including families, communities, their interactions across systems, their contribution in terms of skills, remittances and anecdotes to understand their potential and importance fully.

Migrant workers should not always be pointed out as vulnerable people; they need to be considered as truly empowered people because they decided to migrate from one place to another. ILO would like to discuss the issue of

unpaid wages as it is the tripartite institution with employers and trade unions as part of it.

Mr. Nair mentioned that migration has to be seen holistically. Country of origin also needs to take responsibility for migrants. It has to be seen that there is no decent work at home, that is why people are migrating and therefore, push factors also need to be addressed. Specifically, regarding labour migration, people are looking at survival economics now, which is essential and not about the revival economics at present.

Regarding the Colombo Process, it was argued that it includes countries other South Asian countries like Thailand, Vietnam and China. Therefore, South Asian countries have to consider Colombo Process in its entirety. Alternatively, sub-regional processes can be emphasised. BIMSTEC is talking about human trafficking. Therefore, other sub-regional groupings have also to be kept in mind. South Asia has to make use of existing legal mechanisms to address the grievances of migrants.

There are three kinds of returnees: Voluntary returnees, Forced returnees and Deportees. Therefore, the real challenge is to manage the return and reintegration of all these returnees: Mr. Shabari Nair

Regarding perspectives on various countries of South Asia, Mr. Nair argued that India is playing a role in ensuring the medical supplies even to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, which is being acknowledged by other countries. In Kathmandu declaration, one paragraph was finally added on migration in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) agenda but only for migrants who are going outside the region for work. He mentioned that only two countries in South Asia- Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had ratified the 1990 convention and other countries should also consider to ratify it. He appreciated Sri Lanka as the first country in South Asia to have a National Labour Migration Policy in 2008, and they have started to revise it. It is perhaps the only country with Return and Reintegration policy in South Asia.

3. Bangladesh needs to have a database of arbitrary detainees

Prof. Tasneem Siddiqui argued that migrant workers have to be seen as the most vulnerable workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the labour migrants. It has to be noted that Bangladeshi migrants face

different sort of challenges in different regions ranging from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and western developed countries. Prof. Siddiqui mainly focused on Bangladeshi labour migration to the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. She argues that migrants have been worst sufferers in any sort of crises like SARS, economic crisis, or Iraq-Kuwait war. In COVID-19, till now, 1106 migrants have already died. It has also been observed that the infection rate is generally higher among the migrants compared to the local population. The death rate is also higher for migrants as compared to the local population. For migrants, discrimination in accessing healthcare is a significant issue in some countries.

She observes that those migrants who are returning to Bangladesh, are being seen as a threat in spreading COVID-19 in the country. In the beginning, they were not given a chance to shop for essential items. Central government notifications gave the impression of sort of militarisation. Once the Government realised, the discourse has been changed. However, even then, the securitisation is still existing. Whenever there is a chance, even some academicians are arguing that Rohingya refugee camps can be a potential threat in spreading COVID-19. It is a challenge to make everyone understand the reality that those Rohingyas who have been infected with COVID-19 are not responsible for spreading it and should not be blamed.

Migrant workers in crisis need to be helped by destination countries, but they have shrugged their responsibility: Prof. Tasneem Siddiqui

Prof. Siddiqui mentions that many migrants have lost jobs in the Middle East. Eighty per cent of Bangladeshis go to other countries on “free visas” to work in different companies. These people were without food, health. Women migrants in Lebanon and other places suffered most as their employers went to their home without any assurance of food, health and security. The qualitative survey of 50 returnee migrants conducted by her reveals that more than 70 per cent of migrants were forcefully returned to Bangladesh. Mainly in UAE, they were captured from workplaces and homes and were sent to Bangladesh. In Qatar, the Government and employers used “General Amnesty”, indirect way to force migrants back to Bangladesh by luring them through free tickets. Many of the migrants, who were punished and then pardoned in the destination countries, have been brought back in Bangladesh, but are in prison. Therefore, the international legal regime has to be clear about this issue.

Prof. Siddiqui suggests that regarding unclear wages of returnee migrants, there is a need for South Asian countries to unite together and bring these issues in multilateral forums. Part of remittances has to be brought back through

some ways from destination countries. South Asians should launch a movement highlighting the responsibilities of receiving countries.

UN Migration Network has sent statements that migrants should not be sent back arbitrarily or they should be treated equally with locals. Around 170,000 Bangladeshi takas have been left in destination countries. Treatment in detention centres was dismal as some of them were not even given clothes, healthcare and many such essential facilities.

Descuritisation of migration has to be ensured to end xenophobia. University courses on such topics can play an effective role: Prof. Tasneem Siddiqui

Prof. Siddiqui suggested that Bangladesh and all other South Asian countries should develop a database of arbitrary returnees and register their grievances. Even the Colombo Process can be used to present the united voice. The 1990 Convention, only document which provides right to migrants, has to be given more prominence. She expressed concern over the vulnerability of high-skilled workers, including healthcare personnel, who are on the frontline against COVID-19 is high. She notes that Sri Lankan outbound domestic workers in Bangladesh are jobless now. Employers are not supposed to terminate them in such a casual manner. Moreover, the integrated labour market has to be thought in South Asia. The work permit has to be brought, and the labour migration regime has to be established. Migrants must not be considered as extremists, and all South Asian countries should pursue the agenda to declare this decade as Migration Decade.

4. India should leap forward by formulating its Migration Policy

Dr. Ginu Zachari Oommen argued that COVID-19 has restructured and re-routed the global migration pattern. He mentioned about the writ petition filed last week by Lawyers Beyond Borders in Kerala High Court, which led to the HC sending a notice to Ministry of External Affairs, Home and Labour Ministries and Kerala Government to recover residual dues, arrears of payment, and salaries which were not paid by the employers to the migrants and they had to come empty-handed from the Gulf. It was forgotten that migrants are the backbone of many developed nations. He argued that migrant workers had to knock doors of different offices for basic amenities and food. Many charitable organisations, including Pravasi Organisations, gave food and water to migrants. COVID-19 has exposed the already existing miseries of the South Asian workforce. COVID-19 resulted in unemployment, underemployment, non-payment

of salaries, non-payment of dues. Relatives of the dead migrants were not given compensation.

In March, migrants were demanding essential medicines for lifestyle diseases like blood pressures, cholesterol, diabetes, kidney failures, liver dysfunctions. They were requesting the Government to send the basic medicines.

On World Population Day, there is a need to bring the migrant as a core component. The real situation right now is of distress migration. In 2009, Dr. Oommen was in Kuwait and interviewed 40 migrant workers who suffered a lot during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Many companies did not pay salaries to low-skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers, no repatriation benefits and even attempted to terminate them. Even in the 1990s, migrant workers were not given their due wages.

South Asian migrants are being considered as 'disposable migrants' as Gulf countries know that even if they terminate agreements with migrants or do retrenchment, 1 or 2 million migrants will reach there: Dr. Ginu Zachari Oommen

Dr. Oommen suggests that India should have a Migration policy, as bilateral and trilateral agreements have proved to be ineffective and immense pressure is mounting on sending countries to repatriate migrants. During COVID-19, migrants are forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. There is a need to rethink and revisit our policies regarding migration. Origin countries have the dilemma of promotion and protection of migrants. COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to renegotiate and revamp the whole system and empower the South Asian labour migrants.

On the viable prospect of the regional bloc, he argues that SAARC is one of the most volatile organisations in the world. He doubts that there can be a consensus on any vital issue and opines that South Asians do not have a collective voice to raise the plight of migrants.

According to him, because of the high literacy rate of Kerala, even migrants whether low skilled or semi-skilled are educated as they have passed 12th (higher secondary class) and most of them are graduate. Now, there is a social taboo in Kerala about specific jobs to be performed by these educated migrants. Till now, demands of Kerala for these jobs were being fulfilled by Assamese, Bengalese or persons from Jharkhand. At present, 1,80,000 Keralites have returned from various destinations. The larger question is whether they will be willing to work in these sectors.

Steps like Dream Kerala Initiatives, which map skills and experience of migrants to use their potential constructively is appreciated and can be emulated: Dr. Ginu Zachari Oommen

There is also retrenchment and termination of professionals, including IT professionals in the Gulf. Under the proposed Dream Kerala initiative, it is being planned to engage them, suggestions are being asked, and then it will get assessed. Even, rehabilitation and reintegration package will be discussed in a few weeks. There is a need for global migration management.

Regarding atrocities in Gulf countries, Dr. Oommen reported that from 2016 to 2019, official MEA data shows that 70,000 complaints have been received from Gulf countries in various missions. In 2019 alone, 8000 complaints have been received. Kafala exploitative sponsorship system is still existing, where there is no room for grievance redressal in Courts. There are cases in Kuwait, where employers have dragged women from their shelters. It has to be addressed in the most efficient manner. There are hardly few scholars who are raising the voices of migrant women workers. The recent Amnesty International Report argues that the burden of domestic workers has been doubled due to the presence of all family members round the clock. COVID-19 has exposed many of these vulnerabilities. There is a great demand for health workers, nurses, paramedics and doctors, and it is going to be doubled in the coming days.

5. South Asian countries should unite to provide legitimate rights to migrant workers vis-à-vis employers

Dr. Ganesh Gurung argued that there are three commonalities which exist among all South Asian countries. Firstly, all South Asian States are labour sending countries. Secondly, most of the workers are semi-skilled or unskilled. Thirdly, the issues and problems of South Asians are almost the same. However, he expressed concern that despite these commonalities, it is an issue that employers are enjoying the benefits when South Asian countries are competing with each other. He argued that ASEAN countries have suitable protocols for migration and are in a better position to bargain with many countries, which is missing in South Asia.

South Asians are not united and mostly compete with each other, which in turn benefits employers of other regions: Dr. Ganesh Gurung

He mentioned that before the impact of COVID-19, 1000-1200 persons were going daily from Nepal to Gulf and in

Malaysia. Almost 40 Lakhs people had reached there and were sending 2.4 billion Nepalese rupees every day, which was the bloodline of the Nepalese economy. That was 24% of Nepalese GDP before the COVID-19. Now, the situation has reversed as nearly 28,000 Nepalese migrants have infected abroad, 143 in 14 countries have died, and 20,000 migrants have been brought back. Dr. Gurung appreciated the Non-Resident Nepalese Association in respective countries of destination for playing an active role in supplying food, medicines and resources to the migrant workers.

He raised deeper concerns over the inhuman behaviour by employers as there was no basic food, medicine was not supplied to sick Nepalese migrants, salaries were not paid, and very bad conditions existed during accommodation. Many employers did not pay the money for a return ticket back to home by arguing that the Government has already given an amnesty to migrants and hence they can go back. However, as per the contract, employers were supposed to provide tickets money, which they have not been committing. Therefore, the big debate in Nepal is going over the issue of who should be paying the return ticket. The Court in Nepal has said that return ticket money needs to be paid from the Welfare Fund, which has financial contribution of migrants. Still, many Nepalese are waiting to return, and it is posing a big challenge.

According to Dr. Gurung, the issue of stigmatisation of migrants has emerged as a real concerning issue. Earlier migrants were being considered as heroes, and now they are being chased by the police and seems that they being hunted by the police. Now, they are being seen as Zeroes and a threat to the community. Moreover, the unemployment rate in Nepal is already high and therefore, it is a hard challenge to reintegrate them.

Nepal and other South Asian countries need to have data of how many migrants have returned, about their skills, what jobs were they doing in destination countries: Dr. Ganesh Gurung

The open border between Indian and Nepal is also emerging as a challenge which has to be managed by both countries. India and Bangladesh have managed it well. So many regional cooperation mechanisms have failed, and hence there is a need for functional working modality so that South Asia can have collective bargaining power.

There is a need to see why SAARC failed? Therefore, there is a need for functional working modality. He suggested that COVID-19 will open up new migration corridors. Therefore, South Asians should start to find new destinations other than Gulf and Malaysia and should choose countries like Australia and New Zealand where human rights are ensured,

and better wages and facilities are available. He further argued that until and unless South Asians do not raise the salaries of nurses and doctors, they will continue to migrate to other countries.

6. COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerabilities of migrants and impacted the remittances and economy of Sri Lanka

Dr. Ramani Jayasundere observed that in the pre-COVID-19 phase, migrant labourers were contributing the highest income in Sri Lanka. Especially in 2019, it was 6.7 US billion \$ that makes 7% of Sri Lanka's GDP. It shows that Sri Lanka is strongly dependent on migrant's earnings. In terms of the profile of the migrant workers, most of them are low-skilled or semi-skilled. She stated that 40% of migrant workers are women, and they are primarily engaged in domestic work.

In the post-COVID-19 scenario, There has been a hard impact on the Sri Lankan economy. There is a widespread fear of remittances and also to revive the economy.

She argues from the worker's perspective that existing vulnerabilities are increasing and are profound. 1.5 million migrant workers are engaged in Gulf countries, and almost 40,000 recorded migrants have lost jobs in the Gulf and are waiting to return. There is a government portal- Contact Sri Lanka, where migrant workers are invited to put their questions and queries. 13, 000 questions are pending to be answered regarding various aspects of labour migration. It has to be pointed out here that these are the people who have access to the internet, android mobiles and computer, and many others still do not have any access to the internet.

Dr. Jayasundere points out that currently, 14, 000 citizens have been repatriated, among which 37% has been migrant workers. Micro-issues associated with migrants, employers and governments are also there to be observed. Five thousand one hundred workers from various parts of the world including Male, Dubai, Qatar, Dhaka and Singapore have come to Sri Lanka. According to official statistics, 35 migrant workers of Sri Lankan origin have died of COVID-19, and 1700 are positive patients.

She provided a perspective that Sri Lanka has a strong, successful approach to prevent the community spreading stage of COVID-19 in reference to returnee migrant workers, students, and tourists. The process has been very clear where the returnees are being quarantined in the official quarantine centre and then at home. The medical sector has been interwoven with the military sector to ensure the strict compliance of these process. Being Island country, Sri Lanka has got one entry point, where the Government can confidently take steps, which has proved to be one of the decisive factors in containing COVID-19 cases.

**There is no issue of stigmatisation of migrants in Sri Lanka because of the safeguards and strict quarantine measures taken by the Sri Lankan government:
Dr. Ramani Jayasundere**

Dr. Jayasundere suggests that the official data of Sri Lankan government is quite reliable, but the civil society organisations, who have been in constant touch with the migrant workers show that figures are much more significant and issues are much severe than being showcased. Regarding the Sri Lankan government response to the COVID-19, she contended that on short-term measures, repatriation and health-related issues are on the priority of the Government. There are government schemes like subsidies for migrant workers families to withstand the COVID-19 period.

She argues that integration and re-migration issues are actively being discussed at the policy level. Sri Lanka has a reintegration sub-policy as a part of its labour migration policy. For over ten years, so many discussions are going on regarding reintegration, but the implementation is slow. The reintegration of low-skilled migrant workers is challenging in terms of their skills being utilised.

**There is a push to maintain and boost remittances in the Sri Lankan policy circles. Forums like Colombo Process and SAARC are extremely important for Sri Lanka:
Dr. Ramani Jayasundere**

On dwindling remittances and its impact on Sri Lanka's economy, she argues that the National Labour Migration Policy of Sri Lanka is being revised. On long-term measures, the issue of reintegration is being discussed. She suggested that employment generation for low-skilled migrant workers have to be addressed. According to Dr. Jayasundere, Sri Lanka has bilateral agreements with countries like South Korea and Malaysia and few other countries as well, and some other destinations are also being explored in terms of skills, security and lucrative remittances.

Dr. Jayasundere points out that in Sri Lanka, domestic work has not been legalised, and hence very difficult to reintegrate women. Women are lagging behind in terms of employment opportunities. Opportunity for women for skilled and more lucrative labour is going to get endless for women, lack of access to employment is an issue. Women with low skills are getting lesser opportunities, and there is a lack of domestic labour recognition also. Women are responding to whatever is being given in terms of employment.

7. Migrant workers have to be empowered and duly informed about their rights during pre-departure orientation: Mr. Ahmed Tholal

Mr. Ahmed Tholal argued that from the perspective of tourists, Maldives is a beautiful country with great hospitality. However, from the perspective of migrant workers, the situation in the Maldives is dismal. The last census conducted in the Maldives in 2014 reports that there are 63,000 foreigners in the country. There are 56,000 males and 8,000 females and shows the under-representation of women. The Maldives has over 100000 of migrant workers, and most of them are undocumented.

According to Mr. Tholal, on the impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers, the narrative of the Maldives Government is entirely different, and currently, it is being shown that there are too many migrant workers in the country, and it is being posed as a problem. The Maldives has witnessed three consecutive protests because of adverse living conditions, non-payment of wages, inhumane treatment.

Big companies in the Maldives are using COVID-19 as a very convenient excuse to mistreat, not to pay wages and to de-humanise the plight of migrant workers: Mr. Ahmed Tholal

For years, inhumane conditions were existing, and people and the Government conveniently ignored it. Mr. Tholal has reported that more than two hundred migrants from Bangladesh were brought by a company and were shifted to one island, where they were not given adequate food and healthcare, and when his organisation became vocal for their due rights, they were labelled as traitors as if they had committed treason against the State. He argued that his organisation is raising the issue of non-payment of wages, talking about the redress to the victims of human trafficking, exploitation of workers. There is a high possibility that many of these migrant workers have been a victim of human trafficking. He also contended that the first-ever income tax levied by the Maldives was from migrant workers. Remittance tax is being taken from the migrant workers in the Maldives. There are problems of housing where almost 150 migrants are cramped into a small room with no ventilation, no toilets, no hygienic facilities.

COVID-19 related deaths in the Maldives have been under the 75-90 years age group, whereas migrants under the 30-45 years age group, even without any other pre-existing condition of diseases have died: Mr. Ahmed Tholal

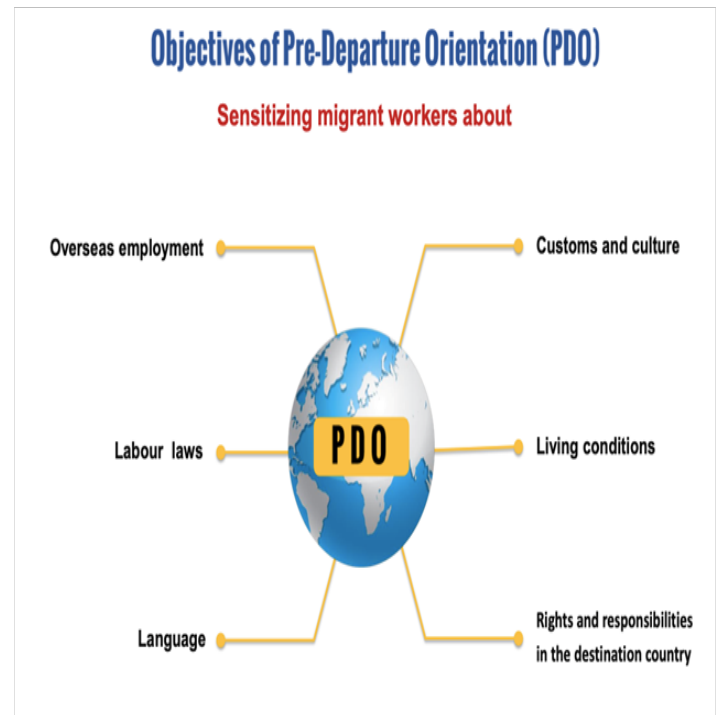
He argued that countries of origin need to realise that migrant workers' rights are being violated in the Maldives, and they are suffering every single day. They do not have the power and capability to access the institutions which can provide them with their rights. There is a lot more unsaid, infighting, misunderstanding between countries of origin, transit countries and countries of destination. Moreover, the political dynamics at SAARC also poses a unique challenge. In the Colombo Process, there are issues like pre-departure orientation programmes that need to be streamlined to create understanding and knowledge about the countries of destination.

In terms of suggesting solutions, Mr. Tholal stated that pre-departure orientation programs need to be streamlined and migrants need to be empowered. Migrant workers coming to the Maldives from other countries like Bangladesh have very little understanding of the work environment, the laws, not totally equipped with the information required.

He argued that there are many positives of regional mechanism, which can empower migrant workers. He also observed that Maldivians are strategically becoming xenophobic, which reveals that people are showing more hatred towards migrant workers than professionals like doctors etc. from certain countries.

• **Sectoral Identification Needs to be done for Mass Employment of South Asian Migrants.**

• **Strict Compliance of Pre-departure Orientation Programmes has to be Ensured for Outgoing Workers**



Source: ICM (2018). Pre-Departure Orientation for Migrant Workers. New Delhi: India Centre for Migration. <https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/static/english-pre-departure-orientation-for-migrant-workers.pdf>

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• **There is a Need for Skill Mapping of Returnee Migrants by Respective Governments of the South Asian Region.**

Returnees with a positive migration experience, who...	Returnees with a negative migration experience, who...
- earned the money they planned to	- did not earn anything and lost what they have had
- acquired new technical knowledge and skills	- returned in a forced way
- did not manage to collect the planned amount of money, but paid all family debts	- experienced various forms of abuse, including smuggling, trafficking, exploitation, etc.
- do not intend to re-migrate	- intend to re-migrate
- are determined to invest their resources into a business in their native community	
- are determined to find a job on the local market	

Source: (ILO, 2017, p. 30).

How to Facilitate the Recognition of Skills of Migrant Workers: Guide for Employment Service Providers. Geneva: ILO.

• **Counter Measures are Highly Needed for Removing Stigmatisation related to Returnee Migrants.**

• **De-securitisation of Migration is Highly Needed to Overcome Various Forms of Discrimination.**

• **There is a Need for a Common Platform for South Asian Countries to Espouse the Cause of Migrant Workers' Due Rights.**

• **There is a Need for a Joint Mechanism by South Asian Countries to Raise Voices against Discrimination being Faced by Migrants in the Gulf countries.**

• **South Asian Countries need to Frame Reintegration Policies for Migrant Workers.**

• **The help of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is suggested to Resolve the Issue of Unpaid Wages of Migrant Workers, who have Returned from Various Countries.**

• **There is a Need to Empower and Support Diasporic Organisations for helping migrant workers in coping up the pandemic.**

CONCLUSION

In 2013, Human Rights Watch wrote a letter to SAARC to draw its attention to the “abuse and exploitation of workers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Kuwait” and asked for a “regional protection initiative, so that member states can join forces to leverage their collective bargaining power and seek greater protection for their citizens in line with international labor and human rights standards” (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Till now, there has not been a remarkable policy change on behalf of South Asian countries, which can provide due rights to the migrant workers of South Asia working in Gulf countries. COVID-19 pandemic has intensified and exposed the issues being faced by migrant workers—discrimination, unequal treatment, stigmatisation, xenophobia, exploitative kafala system, unsafe working conditions, irregular wages, no proper judicial mechanism, wage-theft and many others. Human rights of migrant workers need to be protected at all cost. South Asian countries should strive for the collective and effective mechanism, which require a political will from respective governments to achieve positive outcomes ensuring justice and human rights of migrant workers.

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