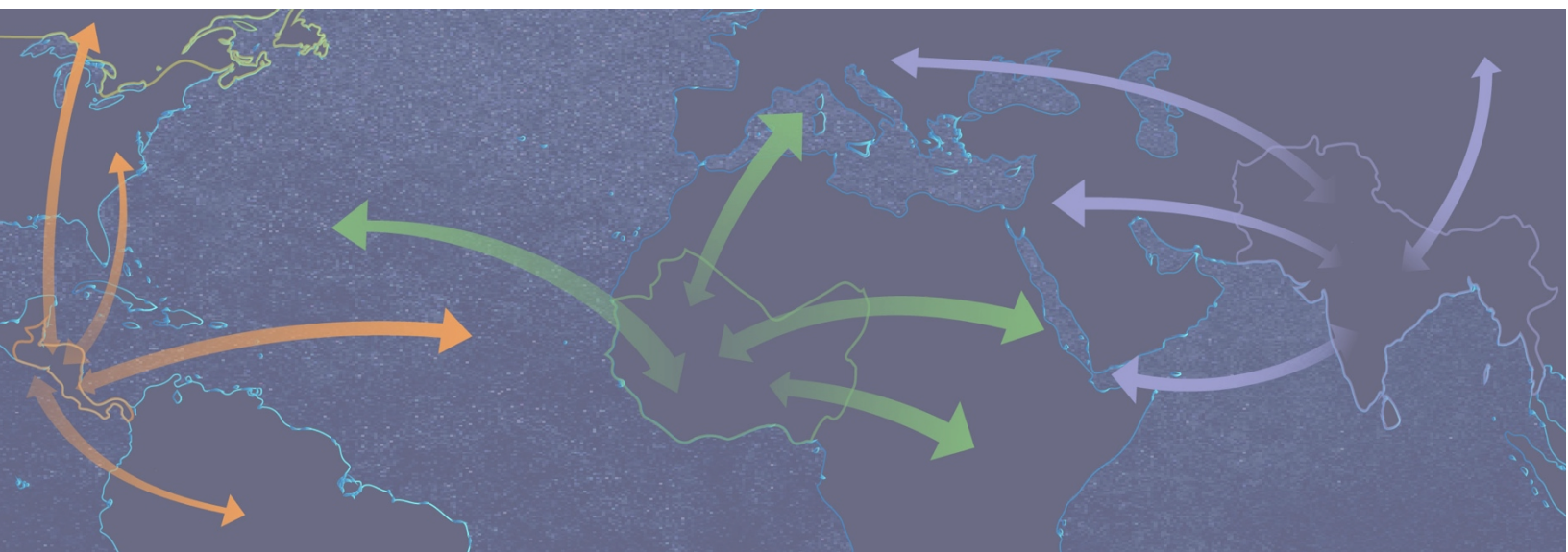


MEMO

Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective



Background country report on Nepal within the migration system of Asia

The MEMO research partnership is led by:



Canada Excellence
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Migration & Integration

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Canada

The MEMO Research Project

MEMO is a **multidisciplinary project** to develop a socio-ecological system framework that integrates drivers (main contextual factors) and individual determinants of migration; its primary objectives are:

To map the links between internal, intra-regional and intercontinental migration along complex population dynamics and migration systems;

- To describe and interpret the interplay among migration drivers (environmental conditions, demographic and health factors, economic development dynamics, socio-political issues), accounting for cultural and emotional processes that can shape individual decisions to migrate;
- To provide evidence to inform policy and support an efficient and rights-based governance of international migration.

Differences and analogies of migration drivers and determinants are comparatively established across (and within) the following regional migration systems:

- **The Americas** – focusing on migration flows from the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to Mexico and further North to the USA and Canada.
- **West Africa** – focusing on Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Ivory Coast and their inter-related flows to each other, to neighbouring countries in West Africa and towards Europe and Canada.
- **South Asia** – focusing on Nepal and Bangladesh, internal and cross border flows within South Asia, as well as to Malaysia and Canada. The migration system and population dynamics are described and modelled to capture the plurality of (multi-directional) population flows.

MEMO will contribute innovative analytical tools to support a rights-based governance of migration and related drivers.

Research partner organizations



Background country report on Nepal within the migration system of Asia

Sagar Raj Sharma¹
(Kathmandu University, Nepal)

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¹ The author is a professor of Development Studies at Kathmandu University.

1.0 Introduction

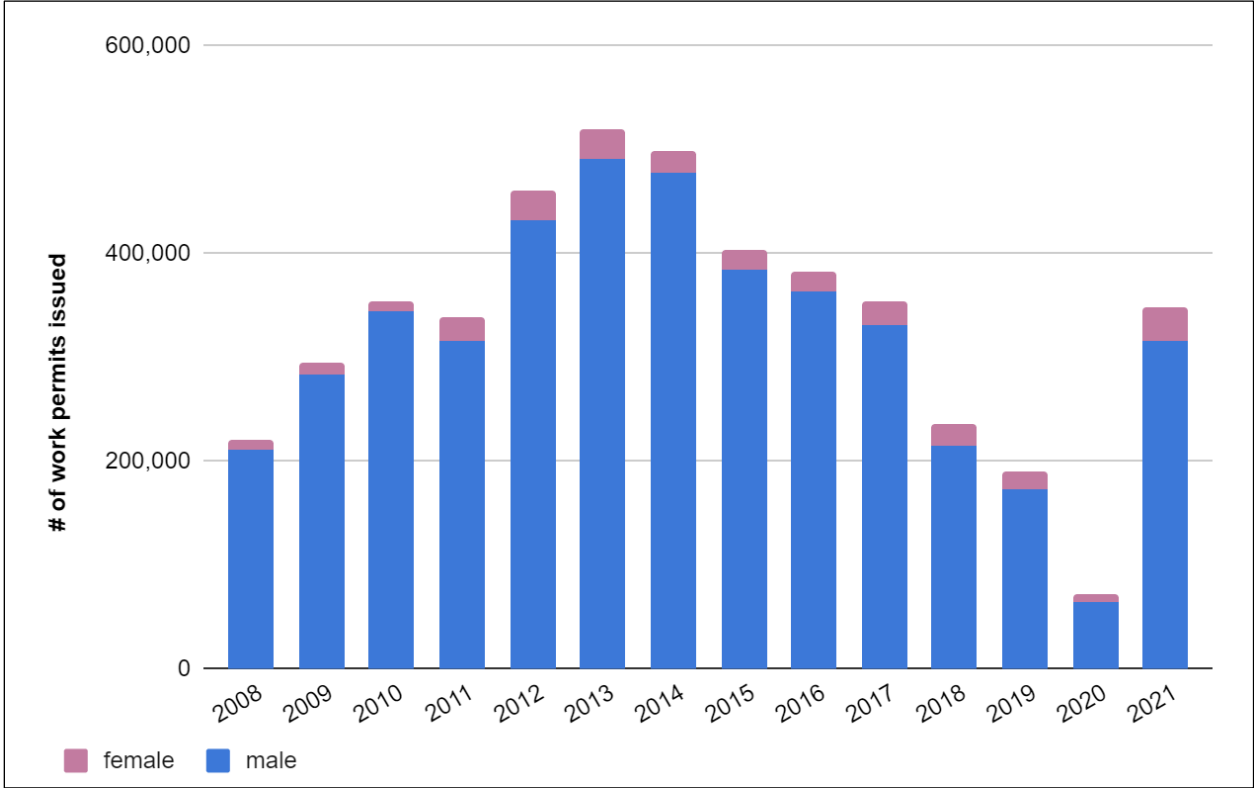
The Janus face of migration in Nepal

Nepal has a long history of internal and international labour migration. Internally, the people started becoming visibly mobile in massive numbers from the days of the unification of the country during the mid to late 18th century. As the unification of the several fractured states along with the expansion of the territories took place, it was natural that many groups of people had to move from one place to another or settle down in new areas. Since then, internal migration has continued over the years, for various reasons. Secure livelihood has always been the most pressing need for this migration, but other factors have triggered migration too, sometimes even large-scaled ones. At one time, it was the state’s policy-induced migration from the hills to the plain lands (Tarai), which started in the late 1950s after the eradication of Malaria from inner Tarai, when a big chunk of the hill population moved to now-liveable plains, largely influenced by the implementation of land resettlement programs initiated by the government. At another, it was conflict-induced migration, most recently during the Maoist-led armed insurgency during 1996-2006. At yet other times, it was disaster-induced (earthquakes and floods) migration. Other factors seem to have become equally, if not more, influencing out-migration, namely, political instability and disenchantment, lack of on-farm and off-farm employment, and restlessness in the youth. But never in Nepal’s history has outward migration to foreign countries been as pronounced as it is today. For instance, in the 1950s, the Nepali population migrating to international destinations was just under 200,000 (CESLAM, 2023). However, over the past six decades, the migration numbers have experienced a significant increase reaching approximately 2.2 million by 2021 (Census, 2021). There are different forms of outward migration from Nepal, but foreign labour migration – mostly to countries in East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe– has recently become the most visible category of migration in terms of the volume of migrants.

Although the number of labour migrants decreased in the subsequent years, it seems to be rising again at an even faster rate, as can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the number of labour approvals issued by the government over the years to aspiring foreign labour migrants². Those who get such approvals are allowed to emigrate to different destination countries for labour. Although the number declined significantly during the peak COVID-19 years, it appears to be now again rising, slowly but gradually reaching its pre-COVID figures.

² Throughout this paper, the terms foreign labour migrants and foreign migrant workers are used for those Nepalis who go abroad (foreign countries) to work as migrant workers.

Figure 1: New Labour Approvals Issued from Nepal, 2008/09-2021/22



Source: MoLESS, 2022, elaborated by the author

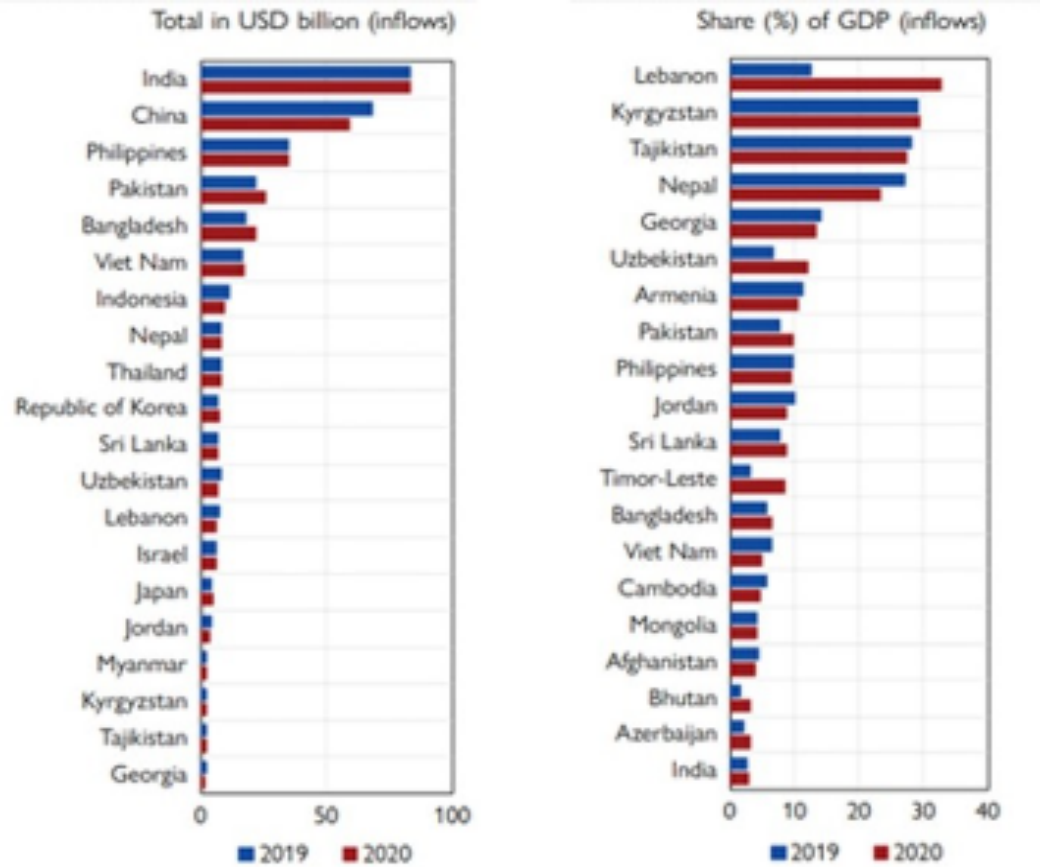
This high number of workers going out for employment is also due to the fact that the government has approved 111 destination countries for labour migrants (MoLESS, 2022), of which the top five destinations are: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia. All these destinations are states where oil wealth or labour shortages have created opportunities for foreign workers. Labour migrants send money and bring home acquired skills, but they also contribute to increasing the Nepali population’s resilience. For example, when the 2015 earthquakes struck, remittances from abroad quickly increased, cushioning families back home against the financial shock of the disaster. Migrants’ remittances have played an instrumental role in keeping the Nepali economy afloat, but it can also be questioned if foreign employment could be a sustainable livelihood option, especially at times of crisis, when in destination countries the demand for foreign workers can go down. For example, when the global economy stagnated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis abroad lost their jobs and were forced to return home, consequently resulting in much-reduced flows of remittances. Although that has recovered in recent months, the sustainability of migration as a viable employment option is a general concern. However, as of now, foreign employment has clearly become the most significant motivation for recent international migration from Nepal.

As astounding as these figures may look, however, it is not just the sheer number of migrants that should deserve attention. Over time, labour migration has become an integral part also of Nepal’s economy. Figure 2 shows that remittances coming in through Nepali migrants constitute

more than a quarter of the country’s GDP in 2019-2020. In 2017-18, Nepal had the fifth highest remittances-to-GDP ratio in the world (WB, 2021). Looking at other Asian nations that received remittances, we see that India and China received the largest amount in terms of absolute figures. For example, in 2020, India and China received a combined total of more than USD 140 billion (WB, 2021). Other major remittance recipients included the Philippines, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. As a percentage of GDP, some of the most significant recipients in 2020 were Lebanon (33%), Kyrgyzstan (29%), Tajikistan (27%) and Nepal (24%). Compared with 2019, inward remittance flows to Asia decreased modestly by around 2 per cent in 2020 due to the global pandemic. In India, the region’s largest recipient country, remittances fell by just 0.2 per cent, reaching USD 83 billion. Similarly, Nepal also saw a decrease in the flow of remittances in 2020 (Figure 2), although the share in GDP was still high and the remittances are showed signs of returning to previous levels (WB, 2021).

Such high rates of remittances have played a critical role in reducing Nepal’s overall poverty rate (NPC, 2021). This has come as a huge respite to this economically weak, politically unstable, and disaster-prone country, where remittances have proven to be an essential lifeline and often represent a reliable source of income in times of uncertainty.

Figure 2: Top Asian international remittance recipient and source countries, 2019 and 2020



Source: World Bank, 2021

According to a recent "Migration and Development Brief" published by the World Bank, remittances coming into Nepal are projected to maintain a healthy trend of 7.6 per cent growth in 2023 and 3.6 per cent in 2024, surpassing \$10 billion (KNOMAD, 2023). High energy prices and low food price inflation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which remain the single-largest destinations for less-skilled migrants from most of the South Asian nations, had positive spill overs for all countries. In Nepal, remittances exceeded previous forecasts and grew by 13 per cent to reach \$9.3 billion in 2022, reflecting partly the dividends from the employment boom related to the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar. According to the report, one reason for this increase in remittances can be attributed to the fact that the GCC countries, which have now become the primary destinations for Nepali migrants, have loosened travel restrictions. These factors, along with comparatively favourable economic conditions in these nations, are major causes for the projected growth in remittance inflows. According to the KNOMAD 2023 report, remittance flows to South Asia in 2022 surpassed expectations to reach \$176 billion, due largely to remittance flows to India overshooting the \$100 billion milestone by \$11 billion (KNOMAD, 2023).

It is in this context and the multifaceted characteristics of migration that make Nepal an interesting case study for examining complex migration patterns, their drivers and trajectories. First, as shown above, the volume of migrant workers from Nepal is large and crucial to the national economy. The migration rates are almost double the global average (Shrestha, 2017), making foreign remittances one of the largest sources of national income, almost a quarter of GDP.

Second, Nepali migrant workers have three different types of migration that vary in terms of costs and returns. The cross-border migration to India has been going on for a long time making it the largest and the key destination country, although the exact number of migrants there is not available. One distinct peculiarity about migration to India is that the country serves as a low-cost and low-return destination for Nepali workers. Next, in recent years, especially since the Maoist-led armed conflict days during 1996-2006 in Nepal, there has been a marked surge in the act of migration that is driven by migration to Malaysia and the GCC countries (especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), which are high-cost-high-return destinations for Nepali workers, encouraging intra-regional migration. In addition, there are now other emerging destinations, mostly in Eastern Europe, whose inter-continental migration phenomena are yet to be understood fully. Migration to these destination countries is facilitated institutionally. While Nepal maintains an open border with India and the migrants can move across the border with extreme ease, travelling to other destinations can be costly and needs official permits and documents, although that too is getting relatively easier in terms of the necessary process and the agreement reached between Nepal and the destination countries. However, it is not just the volume and process that make Nepali migration a unique case to study. The socioeconomic impacts of out-migration in Nepal can be felt across all sectors. Migration is becoming a double-edged sword for Nepal and the Nepalis and can potentially create both positive and negative outcomes depending on how it is governed and what experiences the migrants go through during the entire migration process.

2.0 Recent migration trends

In the ever-changing environment of national and international socio-political and economic dynamism, global migration trends and patterns are also inevitably getting more and more complex and multifaceted. Nepal, too, has been affected by this changing landscape of migration, with both the scale and scope of inter-regional and inter-continental migration growing exponentially over the last three decades or so. The outflow of migrants to different destinations has been caused by various multifaceted drivers, which will be detailed in the following sections.

Looking at the trend of Nepali migrants seeking foreign employment over the last two decades, a clear pattern can be seen of not only an increasing volume, but also of an expansion of the destination countries.

Table 1 shows the annual data on labour permits issued by the Department of Labour and Employment from 2008/09 to 2021/22, when a total of 4,720,311 was issued. There have been some fluctuations in the number of approved labour permits during the period. The 3.8 per cent decrease between 2014/15 and 2013/14 can be attributed to the earthquake that hit Nepal in April 2015. The earthquake and subsequent aftershocks, which occurred in the last quarter of the fiscal year, disrupted all aspects of everyday life, including the procedures for facilitating foreign employment by government and private institutions.

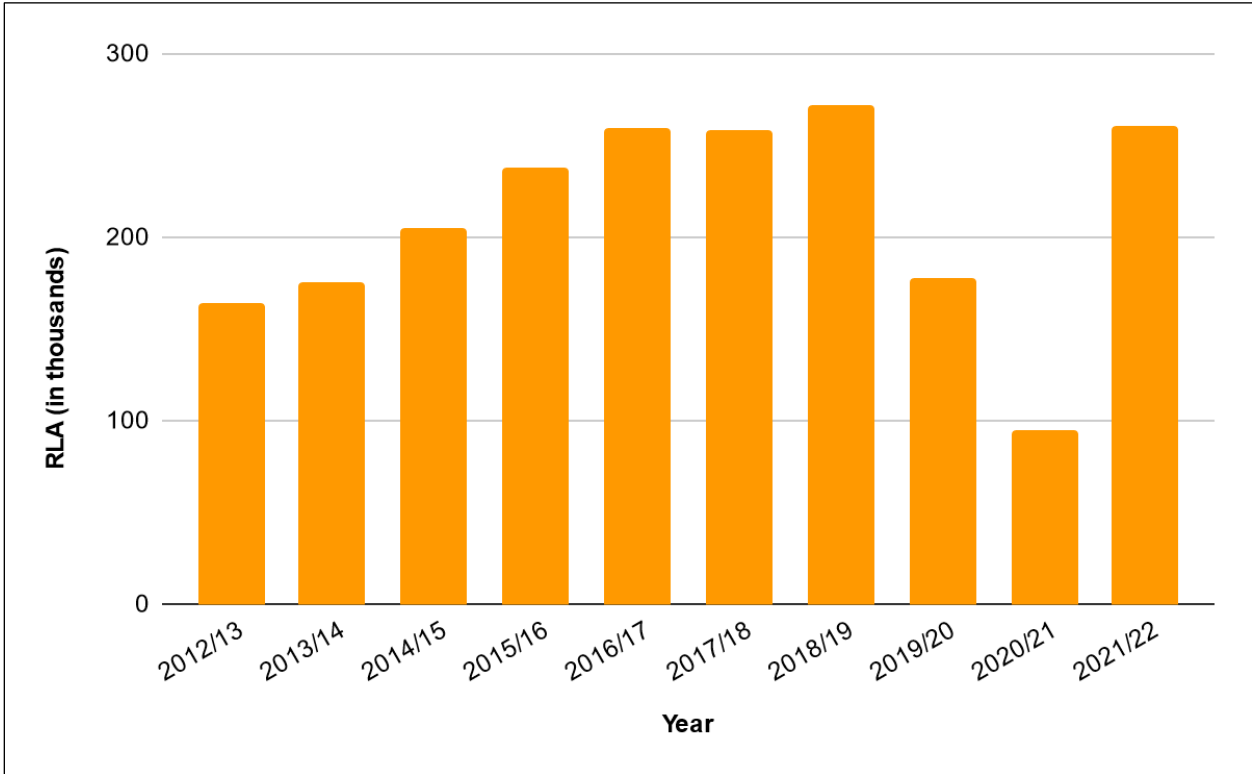
Table 1: Labour permits issued yearly, 2008/09-2021/22

| Year | Female | Male | Total |
|---------|--------|---------|-----------|
| 2008/09 | 8594 | 211,371 | 219,965 |
| 2009/10 | 10,056 | 284,038 | 294,094 |
| 2010/11 | 10,416 | 344,300 | 354,716 |
| 2011/12 | 22,958 | 316,707 | 384,665 |
| 2012/13 | 27,767 | 432,122 | 459,889 |
| 2013/14 | 29,121 | 490,517 | 519,638 |
| 2014/15 | 21,421 | 477,690 | 499,111 |
| 2015/16 | 18,467 | 385,226 | 403,693 |
| 2016/17 | 20,105 | 362,766 | 382,871 |
| 2017/18 | 22,417 | 331,679 | 354,096 |
| 2018/19 | 20,578 | 215,663 | 236,241 |
| 2019/20 | 18,202 | 172,191 | 190,393 |
| 2020/21 | 7,178 | 64,894 | 72,072 |
| 2021/22 | 33,062 | 315,805 | 348,867 |
| Total | | | 4,720,311 |

Source: MoLESS 2020, 2022, elaborated by the author

As the figures above illustrate, there has been a constant increase in the number of approved permits since 2008, which reached a peak in 2013/14 when more than 500,000 new approvals were issued. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure dropped to 72,072 new approvals and 94,617 renewals. But as the Governments lifted the international travel restrictions, the figure jumped up to 630,089 in 2021/2022, which included both new and renewed approvals surpassing the earlier highest of 2013/14 (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security [MoELSS], 2022).

Figure 3: Number of Renewal of Labour Approvals



Source: Nepal Migration Labour Report 2016/17, 2020 and 2022, elaborated by the author

One of the reasons for this significant increase has been that, since 2011, instead of having to start a new procedure each time, the government allowed migrant workers to renew their approvals upon expiration, when the job and place of residence remain the same (Figure 3). This allowed labour migrants to enrol in insurance programs and the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (provisioned in the Foreign Employment Act 2007 for the purpose of providing social security and welfare to the workers and their families who have gone to, or returned from, foreign employment) for extended periods.

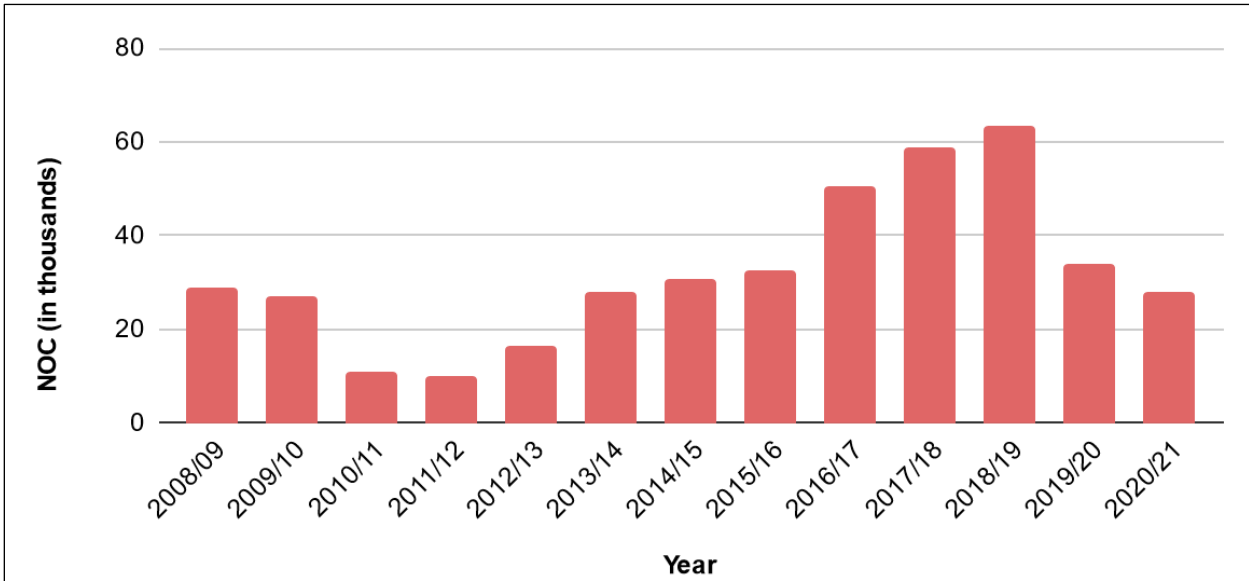
The analysis of key destination countries points out some interesting insights. As the oil-driven revenues in the GCC countries started growing since the 1970s, this region has been an

increasingly important destination for migrant workers from many labour-exporting countries due to the upsurge of demand for workers in key sectors such as construction, hospitality and retail. The government’s migration report from 2020 shows that migrants have accounted for a high share of the population in the GCC, with 88 per cent in UAE, 79 per cent in Qatar, 72 per cent in Kuwait and 45 per cent in Bahrain. The migration of Nepali workers to these countries also began to intensify in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As recorded by DoFE, in 1997/98, 7,166 migrant workers left for foreign employment to the GCC. This volume surged to 128,306 in 2005/06 (MoLESS, 2020).

It is also noteworthy to point out that even with this seemingly high volume of supply of migrant workers, Nepal is still not able to meet the demand for workers from destination countries. For example, during the period of 2019/20-2021/22, the demand for migrant workers (including for both women and men) was around two times more than the number of labour approvals issued by Nepal (MoLESS, 2022). With a very high number of migrants in the labour force in the GCC countries, this demand is likely to continue, at least in the short-to-mid terms.

It has to be underlined that it is not just the migrant workers that are causing such a large exodus of Nepali youths to foreign countries. Student migration from Nepal, especially after completing 12 years of high school, is another phenomenon that has been increasing at a rapid rate in recent years. This can be seen from the number of No Objection Certificate (NOC) issued by the Ministry of Education to Nepali students to study abroad. The data in Figure 4 shows the number of NOCs registered over a span of several years.

Figure 4: Total number of NOC issued by the government, 2008/09-2020/21



Source: NOC section, Education Information Book-2020/21, MoEST elaborated by the author

Another way of looking at the trend of Nepalis migrating out of the country is through the assessment of the absent population or absentees (counted every 10 years), which has been increasing over the years, as the various Population Censuses indicate (Table 2). The latest census (2021) shows that more than two million Nepali people (a total of 2,190,592 persons) from 1,555,961 households (23.4%) are absent and living abroad, signifying that slightly above 7.5 per cent of the total population are living abroad (CBS, 2023). Out of the total absentees living abroad, 1,799,675 (82.2 %) are male and 390,917 (17.8 %) are female. In 2011, 1,921,494 persons from 1,378,678 (25.4%) households were absent abroad of which males were 87.6 per cent and females were 12.4 per cent. The main reasons cited for migration (in 2021) have been marriage (38.2 %), work/job (15.2 %), trade/business (2.8 %), study/training (7.8 %), dependent family member (19.5 %), natural disaster (0.7 %), agriculture (3.9 %), returnee (4.1 %) and other (6.6 %). According to gender, 30.6 per cent of males migrated for work/job and 58.2 per cent of females migrated for marriage. This breakdown is more or less similar to that of the 2011 national census, when 7.3 per cent of Nepalese lived abroad (CBS, 2012). However, the total population is significantly higher than in 2001 when the figure was only 3.2 per cent of the population (CBS, 2002).

Table 2: Total number of absentees residing outside Nepal

| Year | No. of Absentees | Total Population |
|---------|------------------|------------------|
| 1952/54 | 198,120 | 8,256,625 |
| 1961 | 328,470 | 9,412,996 |
| 1981 | 402,977 | 15,022,839 |
| 1991 | 658,290 | 18,491,097 |
| 2001 | 762,181 | 23,151,423 |
| 2011 | 1,921,494 | 26,494,506 |
| 2021 | 2,190,592 | 29,164,578 |

Source: data from various National Census, 1954-2021 elaborated by the authors

2.1 Where do Nepali migrants go?

Historically, Nepali migrants have moved to different places, both internally and outside the country, for work in search of secure livelihood opportunities and employment. For example, every year, hundreds of Nepali youths in the United Kingdom are recruited by the British Army since the Sugauli Treaty of the year 1816 (more on this below). Hundreds of thousands of Nepalese travel to India each year for seasonal, short-term, and long-term work opportunities. In countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, Nepali workers have migrated to fulfil the demand for manual labourers in the local industries. In sum, the international migration destinations of Nepali migrant workers are indeed quite varied and multi-locational. More recently though, it has been the oil-rich countries in the Middle East that have become the largest receivers of Nepali labour migrants, with about half of the total Nepalese migrant workers being employed in the GCC countries (Valenta, 2022). One emerging feature of this labour migration to the GCC

countries has been that it is often not limited to a one-time phenomenon, instead migrants are often seen to either renew their contracts or crisscross to other Gulf countries in the region.

As mentioned earlier, the Government’s labour migration agreement with more than a hundred countries has played an instrumental role in making it easier for aspiring labour migrants to go abroad via recruitment agencies or after obtaining individual labour approvals³. For instance, during 2019/20–2021/22, 150 different countries were recorded where Nepalis migrated with legal approvals from the government (MoLESS, 2022). Nepali workers willing to migrate abroad can obtain labour approvals from the Department of Foreign Employment, either by applying individually or through a private recruitment agency. While the majority of migrant workers obtain labour approvals through such private agencies, there are workers who opt to apply individually. Table 3 below shows the number of approvals obtained via recruitment agencies and individually between the fiscal years 2019/20 and 2021/22.

Table 3: Labour approvals obtained individually and via recruitment agencies

| Year | Individual | Via Recruitment Agency | Total |
|---------|------------|------------------------|---------|
| 2019/20 | 9,671 | 172,210 | 18,1881 |
| 2020/21 | 5,317 | 61,421 | 66,738 |
| 2021/22 | 26,740 | 312,415 | 339,155 |

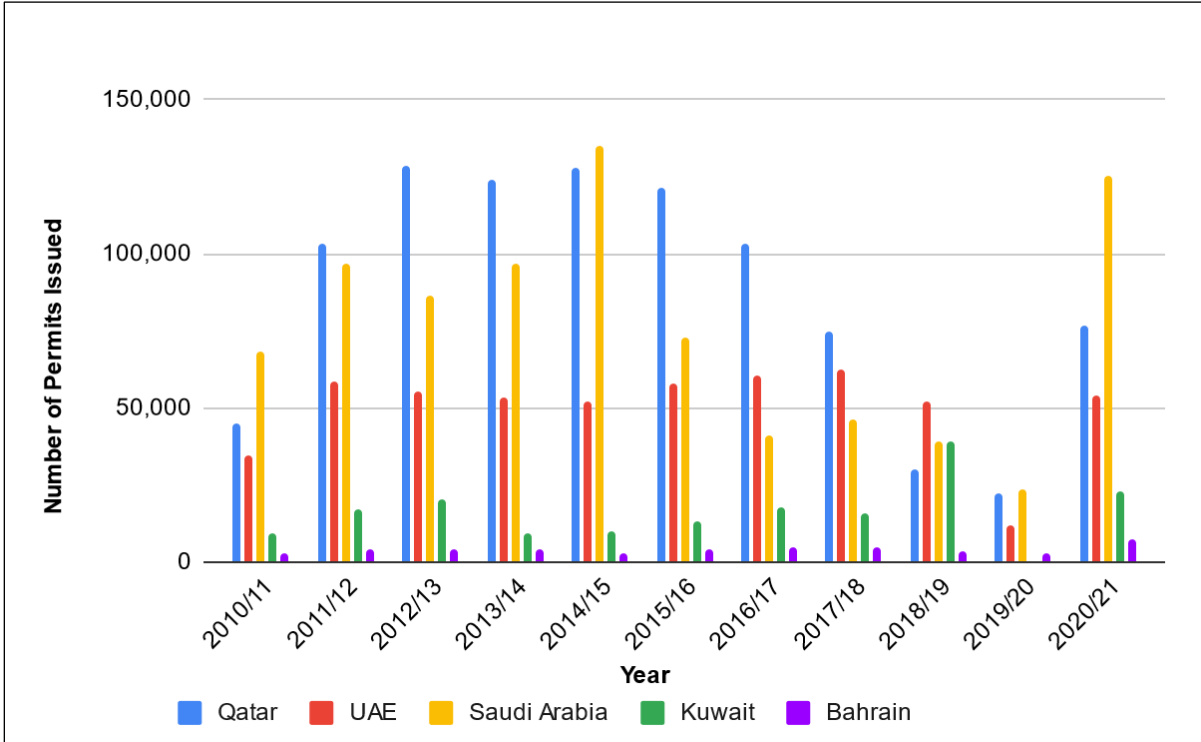
Source: MoLESS, 2022, elaborated by the author

In terms of the number of Nepali migrant workers, the most popular destination countries are several countries in the GCC, together with some East Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. According to the Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates from the GCC countries, along with Malaysia, have consistently been employing a high percentage of Nepali migrant workers for more than a decade (discussed in detail in Section 4).

Although there have been some fluctuations in the number of labour migrants to GCC countries in recent years, the number is still high as can be seen in Figure 5. This high number of migrants is inevitably having a multifaceted socio-economic and cultural impact in many parts of Nepal, especially the rural areas. This is discussed more in the sections below.

³ The ‘new entry’ category of migrant workers refers to those going for a new job abroad. Process of migration of workers in this category is carried out either at individual level or via recruitment agencies. Migrant workers returning to the same job on a renewed contract are placed under the ‘re-entry’ category since they have to only renew their labour approvals and normally do it themselves or with minimal support from intermediaries. Former migrant workers going for a new job need to get a new labour approval (MoLESS, 2022).

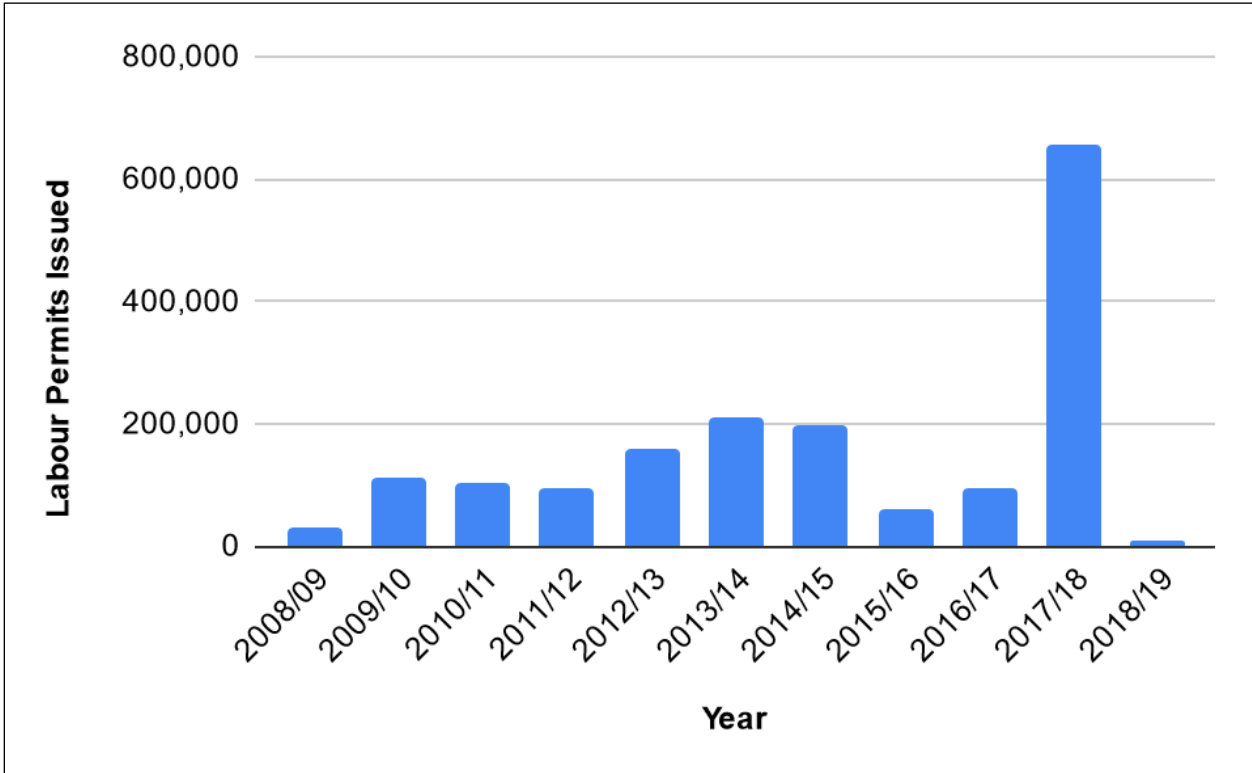
Figure 5: Number of Permits Issued to Top GCC Countries (2010-2021)



Source: data sources: MoEL, 2015/16, 2016/17, elaborated by the author

Apart from the GCC countries, Malaysia is another country that stands out in terms of its acceptance of Nepali migrant labourers. Nepali youths have been migrating to Malaysia since the British colonial period when they were recruited into the British army. In those days Malaya comprised of present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and other territories, where Nepali workers were also employed in rubber, sugar, and palm plantations. Although the official channel of accepting Nepali workers into Malaysia opened only in 2001, there is a continuing high demand for Nepali workers with military backgrounds for employment as security guards since Malaysian companies are supposed to only hire either locals or Nepali security guards. Nepalis are also recruited in the manufacturing, service, agriculture, construction, and other major employment sectors. In 2017 alone, over 200,000 Nepali workers were employed in Malaysia signifying a large presence of Nepalis in that country, although many studies indicate that the actual number has been probably much higher at any given time for the past several years (Kambang & Kharel, 2019). Figure 6 shows the labour permits to Malaysia issued over the years, with 2017/18, just before the pandemic, recording the highest number of permits issued to that country.

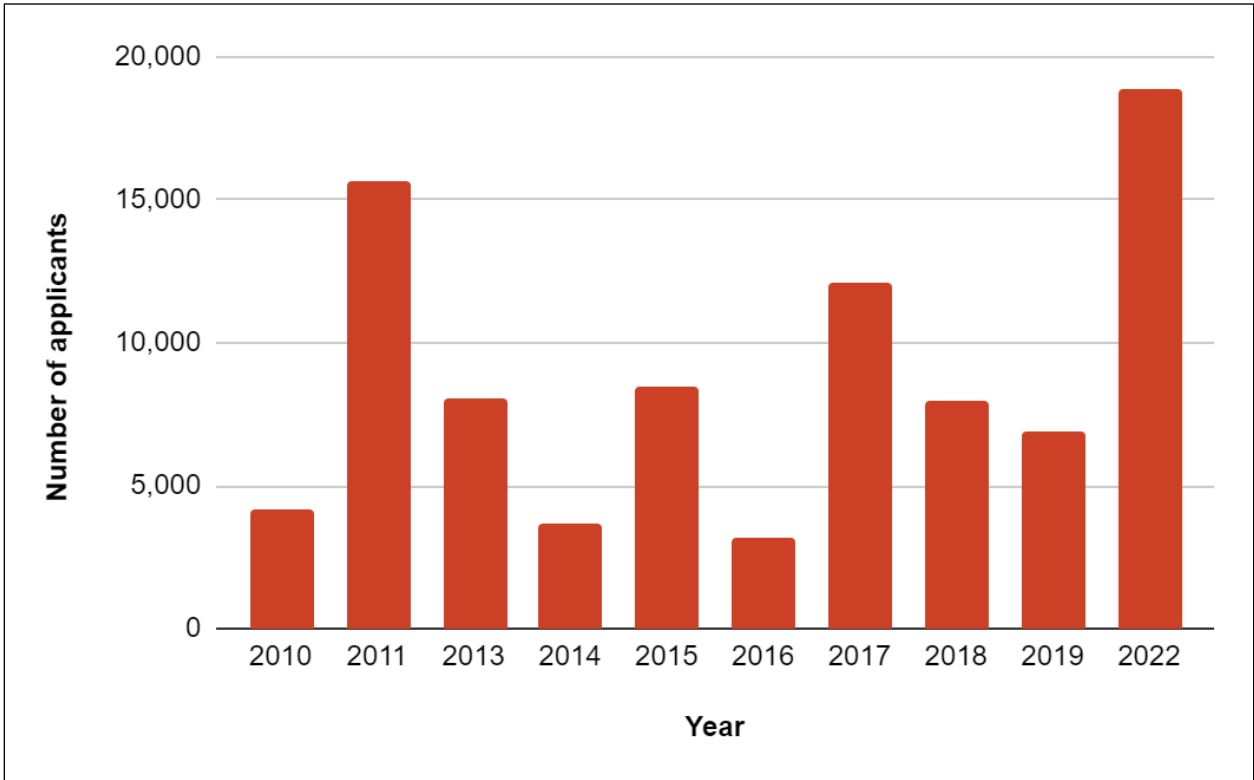
Figure 6: Labour Permits Issued for Malaysia



Source: data sources from Kambang & Kharel, 2019, elaborated by the author

Another increasingly popular destination for Nepali migrant workers has been South Korea. As South Korea looked for new strategies to overcome its own labour and immigration issues, the country launched a new state-run program, known as the Employment Permit System (EPS), which allowed unskilled migrants to enter and work for employers short of labour for up to three years (Yamanaka, 2021). In this program, the Ministry of Employment and Labour (KMEL) was in charge of signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the labour-sending counterpart, administering a Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), and matching a qualified worker with a Korean employer before migration. At work, KMEL ensured equity between foreign workers and Korean workers in the application of labour-related laws and policies (KMEL website). Nepal became one of the early partners of this strategy when South Korea and Nepal signed a Cultural Agreement on March 30, 2005, to promote and develop cooperation between the two countries in the fields of culture, art, education, youth, sports, and tourism. Subsequently, in 2007, these two countries signed an MoU on EPS for recruiting Nepali Workers to work in Korea. This agreement is renewed periodically and is in place even now (MoFA, 2019).

Figure 7: Number of successful applicants in EPS-TOPIK, 2010-2022



Source: data sources: EPS Section, DoFE, 2022 and Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022, MoLESS, Figure 3.15, elaborated by the author

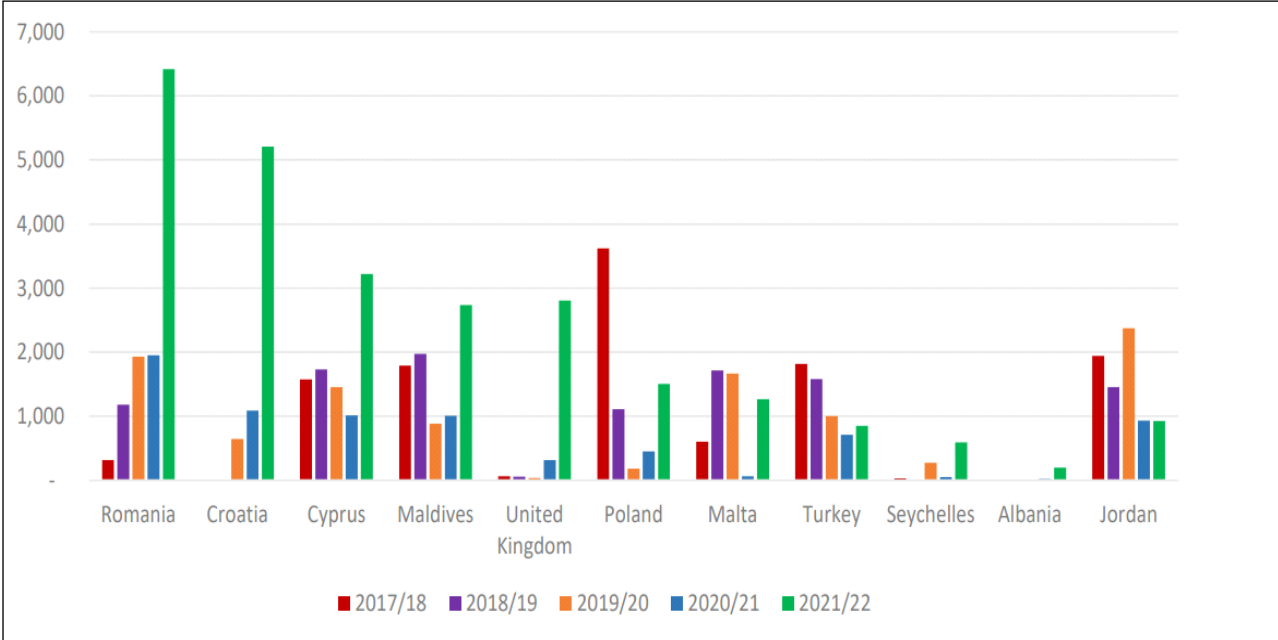
The data in Figure 7 shows the number of successful applicants who passed TOPIK along with skill tests and medical exams, and secured jobs through the government’s human resource division in South Korea in different sectors like manufacturing and agriculture. As can be seen from the figure, there have been regular fluctuations in the number of successful EPS holders, because the test was not conducted in some years (for example in 2009 and 2012), and in other cases, due to the requirement of other physical and skill-based tests beyond a paper-based test. However, after the decrease during and immediately after the COVID-19 years, and since the EPS-TOPIK test was not conducted in 2020 and 2021, there was a notable resurgence in 2022, with the count reaching 18,844, representing a substantial increase (MoFA, 2019).

2.2 Other emerging destinations for Nepali migrants

It is noteworthy that several new countries have recently emerged as prominent destinations for Nepali migrant workers, mainly in Eastern Europe and in West Asia. The new destinations that have emerged from Eastern Europe are countries such as Croatia, Poland and Romania, whereas the popular new destinations in West Asia are Cyprus and Turkey. Other new destinations that seem to be emerging are Maldives, Jordan, and Malta, all of which have seen a significant rise in the number of Nepali labourers migrating there. The number of labour approvals issued for the Maldives increased from 2,450 (including 1,789 new approvals) in 2017/18 to 6,591 (2,735 new approvals) in 2021/22 (MoLESS, 2022). Similarly, Cyprus Jordan, and Malta also experienced a significant increase in the number of Nepali migrant workers. The

growing popularity of these destinations may be due to a policy introduced by DoFE in 2022, which allows for individual labour approvals to be issued to workers who wish to migrate to countries such as Albania, Croatia, Poland, and Romania, as long as they provide a self-declaration that the country and employment is safe (MoLESS, 2022). Figure 8 shows this trend of emerging destinations for Nepali migrants, signifying that they are willing to explore new places as well, while seeking livelihood opportunities. What they do in these countries and what they experience, as well as how they get there in the first place, are some of the issues that need to be further explored.

Figure 8: New Labour Approvals Issued (by Emerging Countries of Destination)

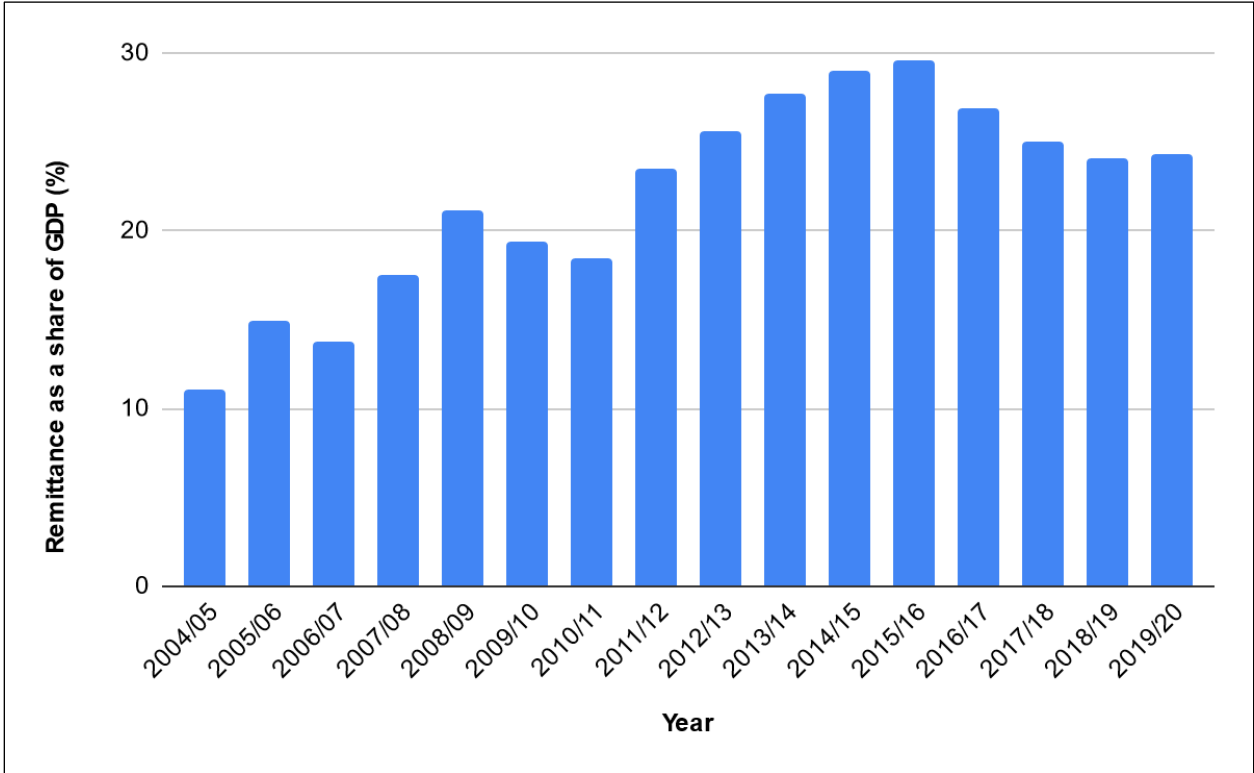


Source: MoLESS, Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020 and 2022, elaborated by author

2.3 Importance of economic migration in Nepal

Nepal ranks seventh globally in terms of the proportion of its economic output that comes from migrant remittances, equalling, on average, around 25 per cent of the country’s GDP (NRB, 2022). As the number of international migrant workers has grown, the volume of remittances received by Nepal has increased from NPR 2.1 billion (approximately US \$16 million) in 1990/91 to NPR 961 billion (approximately US \$7.5 billion) in 2020/21 (ibid). Such high remittance inflow has become a key component of Nepal’s economy and is the largest contributor to the nation’s foreign exchange reserves. Figure 9 shows the remittances in absolute amount and as the share of GDP since 2004/05.

Figure 9: Remittance received in Nepal from 2004 to 2020



Source: WB 2020, MoLESS 2022, and NRB, 2022, elaborated by the author

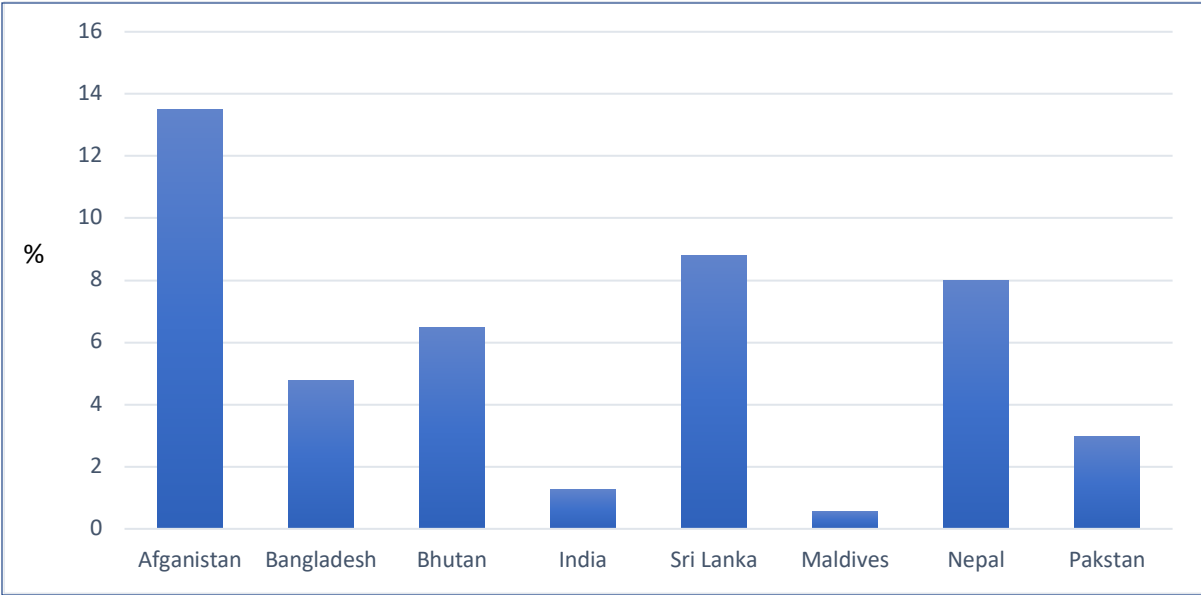
As with any country heavily dependent on foreign remittances, Nepali migration, both internal and international, inevitably becomes a key component for economic development, not just for the nation as a whole at the macro level, but also for the individual migrants and their families, at the micro level. Among other things, one critical factor for this is that labour mobility enables economic development by allowing people to move to locations where they are more productive or where they get to earn more, thereby leading to better allocation of resources. It is especially beneficial for migrants, themselves, especially those who keep in contact with their place of origin because they can spend their earnings in a place with lower prices.

Banerjee and Duflo (2011, 2019), through their longitudinal empirical studies in India and elsewhere, have shown that migration also helps households manage economic shocks. Seasonal or temporary migration is one of the primary mechanisms by which poor households diversify income sources and reduce risk in low- and middle-income countries, as this is confirmed by the thousands of Nepali migrants going to India as seasonal migrants. Migration is also used as an income-smoothing mechanism, with people often migrating after experiencing negative income shocks for example after unproductive agricultural season, or during stagnations after major shocks such as earthquakes or pandemics (Meghir et al. 2020; Morten 2019).

Looking at the proportion of emigrants with respect to the national population, South Asia records the highest share. In 2019, 41.2 million people from the region lived outside their country of origin,

although this number is not particularly large in terms of population shares (UNDESA, 2019). However, there is a noteworthy variation across South Asian countries, with India, where international migrants abroad are only 1.3 per cent of the population of the country, mainly driving the regional average. It is relatively high in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, at about 10 per cent of the population, and also sizeable in Bhutan (6%) and Bangladesh (5%) (See Figure 10). In most countries in the region, people likely emigrate primarily for economic reasons, except for Afghanistan, where conflict and insecurity have displaced a large share of the population (Ahmed and Bossavie, 2022).

Figure 10: The stock of international emigrants as a share of the population across South Asian countries



Source: data from UNDESA, 2019

The number of Nepali migrant workers, mostly semi-skilled and low-skilled, going to the GCC region has been increasing significantly over the recent years (more on this below), but it is similar also for some other countries in South Asia. According to a report by UNDESA in 2019, the South Asia–GCC migration corridor is one of the largest in the world. In 2019, approximately half of emigrants from Pakistan and 42 per cent from Bangladesh were in the Gulf countries. More than one-quarter of Sri Lankan emigrants and one-fifth of Nepali emigrants were in Saudi Arabia (UNDESA, 2019).

3. Internal and cross-border migration

Migration is an integral part of the livelihood mechanism for a vast majority of Nepali citizens. To get a full understanding of the flows and trajectories of migration, however, it is also important to look at where Nepali migrants originate from, and what migration dynamics look like.

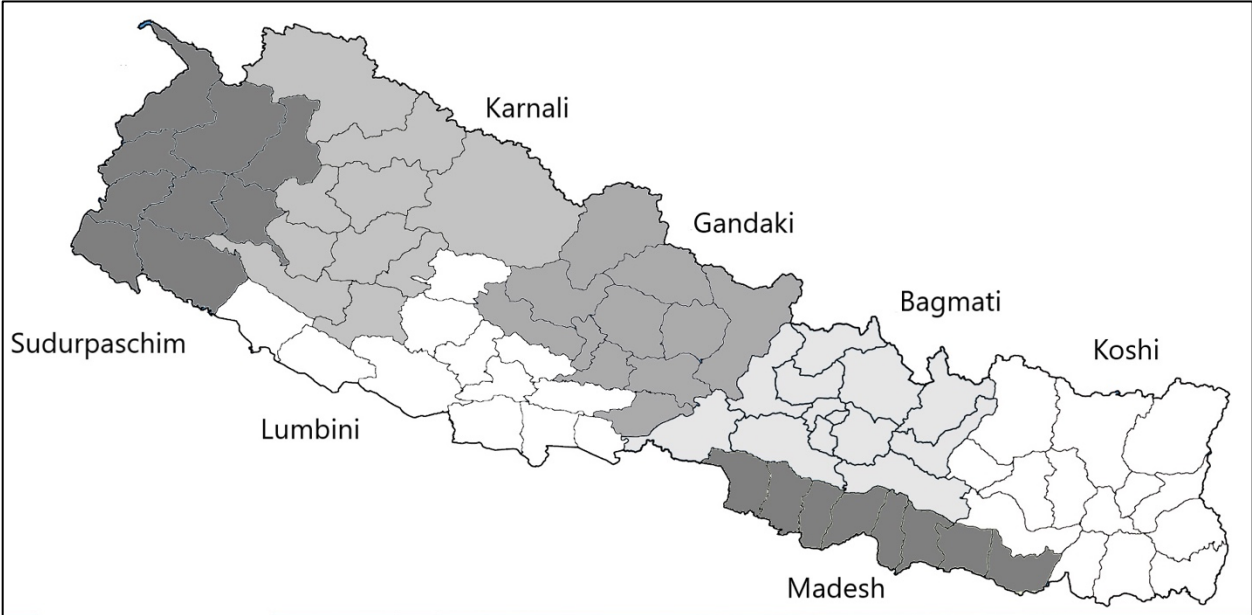
Labour approvals disaggregated by province and district for the years 2019/20–2021/22 show that the highest number of migrant workers hailed from Province 1 (now named Koshi Province, Figure 11) and Madhesh Province, with each accounting for more than one-fifth of the total, while the number of labour approvals issued for migrant workers from Karnali Province and Sudurpaschim Province is quite low. Figures may not reflect the actual number of migrants from there as the majority of migrant workers from these provinces migrate to India, where official statistics are not available (reasons will be explained in the subsequent sections).

Table 4: New labour approvals Issued by different provinces (2019-2022)

| Year | Koshi | Madesh | Bagmati | Gandaki | Lumbini | Karnali | Sudurpaschim | Total |
|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|---------|
| 2019/20 | 46,115 | 44,118 | 31,006 | 24,881 | 31,234 | 7,405 | 5,634 | 190,393 |
| 2020/21 | 14,770 | 20,645 | 11,412 | 9,195 | 11,916 | 2,555 | 1,579 | 72,072 |
| 2021/22 | 70,623 | 100,066 | 54,017 | 42,536 | 58,683 | 13,426 | 9,516 | 348,867 |

Source: data sources from MoELSS, 2022, elaborated by the author

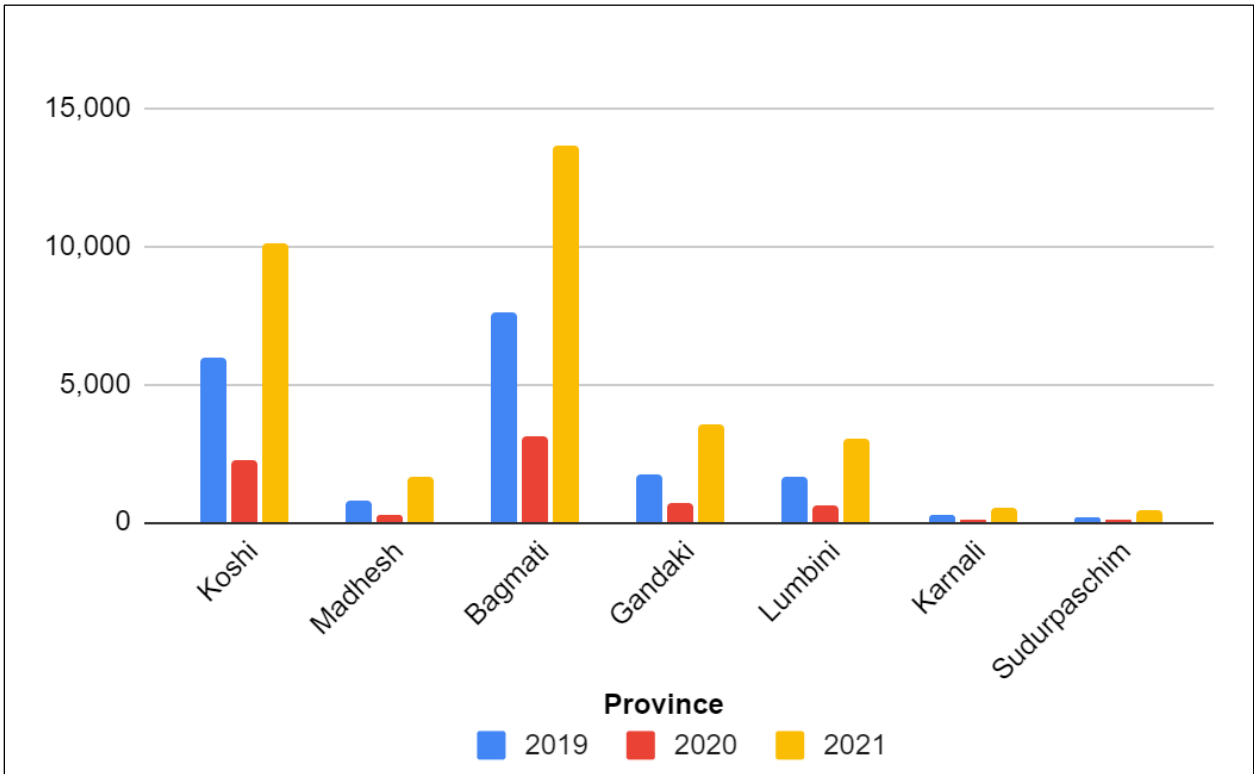
Figure 11: Map of Nepal with Provinces



Source: data sources: nepalidata.com; elaborated by the author, 2023

Women labour migration paints a different picture though with the highest number of women migrant workers coming from Bagmati Province followed by Koshi Province (Figure 12). The share of women from Madhesh is only around 4 per cent. This is likely the result of strict gendered norms among Madhesis, limiting the access to socio-economic capital for women, and the feminization of agricultural work (Sijapati et al 2017; Doss et al 2022; Gupta et al 2022). In 2019/20, the UAE was the top destination for migrant workers from Province 1 (Koshi), Bagmati, Gandaki, Lumbini and Sudurpaschim, while for those from Madhesh and Karnali, it was Malaysia.

Figure 12: New Labour Approvals Issued to Women (by province)



Source: data sources from MoELSS, 2022, elaborated by the author

When examining the internal migration pathways and looking at the originating districts of the Nepali workers that have sought permission for foreign labour migration, some interesting figures and trends are derived. Dhanusha district from Madhesh Province has consistently become the topmost exporter of labour workers in recent years, likely due to its high poverty rate, lack of employment, political instability, and social tensions. The Province of Madhesh is the other district that also shows a high percentage of out-migration, (Table 5), which indicates the harsh conditions influencing the workers to migrate for better livelihood opportunities. For example, the Human Development Index (HDI) of Madhesh Province is 0.519 the lowest in Nepal, while the poverty rate is 27.7 per cent, higher than the national average of 25.2 per cent (CBS 2023).

Table 5: New Labour Approvals from Different Districts of Nepal (in % of Total Migration)

| District | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Dhanusha | 6.6 | 6.2 | 5.4 | 7.5 | 6.6 |
| Jhapa | 4.8 | 5.1 | 5.0 | 4.2 | 3.9 |
| Siraha | 5.0 | 5.2 | 4.5 | 6.4 | 5.1 |
| Morang | 4.2 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 3.6 | 3.6 |
| Mahottari | 4.6 | 4.1 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 4.8 |
| Susnari | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.1 |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|
| Sarlahi | 3.6 | 2.6 | 3.0 | 3.3 | 3.8 |
| Saptari | 3.3 | 2.4 | 2.9 | 2.5 | 3.2 |
| Rupandehi | 2.6 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.1 | 2.7 |
| Dang | 2.2 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 2.7 | 2.5 |
| Other | 60.0 | 62.3 | 63.3 | 59.7 | 60.8 |
| Total % | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Total number | 354,098 | 236,208 | 190,393 | 72,072 | 348,867 |

Source: data sources from MoLESS, 2022 elaborated by the author

The data from 2021/22 shows that 57.6% of the total migrant labourers (290,039) heading to GCC countries were unskilled, and 35.5 % were skilled. In contrast, in the case of Malaysia, the majority (53.2%) of the labour migrants were skilled, whereas 39.8 percent were unskilled out of the total 26,091 migrant labourers. As for India, since there is no official data, the actual number of the types of migrants cannot be verified. However, it is generally observed that most of them are seasonal and low-skilled migrants, as discussed below.

3.1 Nepali migration to India

Estimates of Nepali workers in India vary from 3 to 7 million, and most are from western Nepal or the Tarai (Sharma & Thapa, 2013). The International Organization of Migration (IOM)'s 2019 report on Migration in Nepal, estimates that there are between 3-4 million Nepalis living and working in India at any given time. Nepal and India share an 'open' border as per the agreements of a bilateral treaty signed in 1950 (IOM, 2019). According to the treaty, Nepalis and Indians can travel and work across the border and are to be treated at par with the native citizens. For various socio-economic and political reasons, Nepalis have been migrating to India for work since Nepalis started being recruited as 'the brave Gorkhas' in the British Indian army, apparently after they displayed bravery and loyalty in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-15. Before the arrival of the British, India was a land of many kingdoms and principalities and so it was for its neighbour Nepal. The colonial rule in India and its further expansion to Nepal led to the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814 which culminated in the Treaty of Peace of 1816. This treaty marks the conscious delimitation of the India-Nepal border.

The open border between India and Nepal facilitates the free movement of people from both countries into each other's territory without visas and passports. Nepal shares more affinity with India in its culture, religion and overall ethos than say, its other neighbour China. Both India and Nepal have a high number of nationals of the other in their territory. The 1751 kilometres long open border between India and Nepal is a symbol of the continuity of their 'friendly' relations which have existed since ancient times. The antiquity of peaceful correlations between India and Nepal is evidenced in several historical and cultural texts. The border-sharing aspect of the two countries became more conspicuous during British colonial rule in India. The East India Company, in order to facilitate the movement and induction of the brave Gorkhas in the Indian army and to use Nepal as a market for British products, entered into the treaty of Sugauli in 1816 with Nepal. India won

independence from British rule and became a sovereign, democratic republic in 1947. Although Nepal was never colonised by the British, its rulers over the years always had to play a game of strategic balance in order to maintain its independence. With India gaining its independence in 1947, the two countries signed an agreement in 1950 to share an 'open' border and allow its citizens to move to each other's country without restrictions. The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, as it is called, is considered the official blueprint signalling the maintenance of the 'open border' between the two.

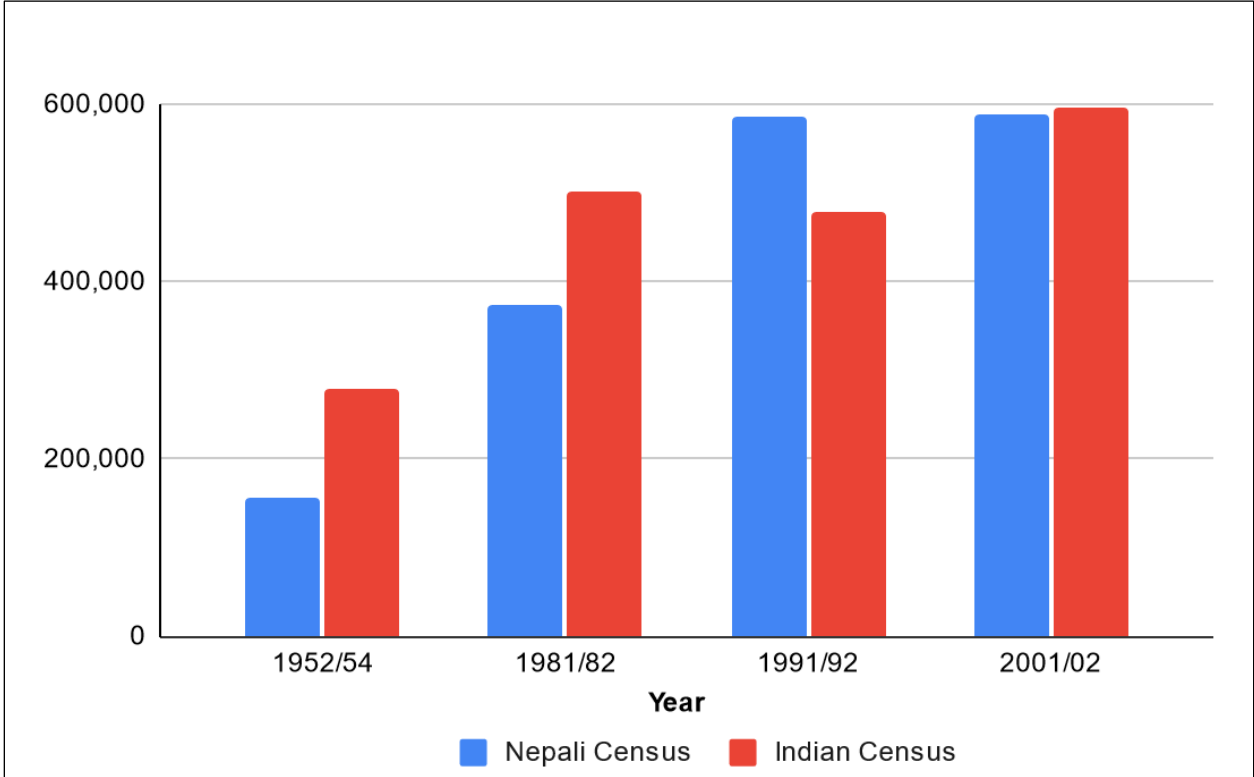
Article VII of the Treaty mentions:

"The Government of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and privileges of a similar nature" (Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India, 1950).

Sharing an open border was a mutually beneficial agreement with both India and Nepal making it clear what it expects from the other in the deal. The treaty basically offered economic opportunities for Nepalese nationals in India against Nepalese assurances that India's security concerns would be respected. Thus, through the open border, the people of both countries have been entering each other's territory, seeking jobs and education, and running businesses. Nepalese people from different walks of life - Gorkha soldiers, labourers, students, and traders – migrate to India and it is the open border that catapults this movement. They have conventionally worked in Gorkha Regiments and civil service and have also contributed equally to the private sector, as domestic workers, security guards, and manual labourers in mines, tea estates, and dairy farms.

As the citizens of both countries enjoy open and unrestricted mobility between them the number of Nepali migrants is difficult to determine. It is often estimated that there are up to 700,000 Indian workers in Nepal. (Nepal Migration Report, 2022). However, the figures given from the two countries do not always match with each other, as seen in Figure 13. Often, the Indian census quotes a higher number of Nepali women migrants in India compared to the Nepali census (Sharma and Thapa 2013). For example, according to the 2011 Census of India, there were 810,158 Nepalis (including 533,369 women) in India while the 2011 Census of Nepal puts that figure at 722,256 (including 116,362 women) (IOM, 2019).

Figure 13: Number of Nepalese in India as per Nepali and India Census



Source: data from IOM, 2019

It is also a fact that there are thousands of seasonal migrant workers crossing the Indo-Nepal border from both sides. Most migrant workers from both countries are unregistered and unprotected, working in the informal sector, often under unsafe working conditions; they remain vulnerable to injuries, abuses, and exploitation. Despite the uncertain and vulnerable conditions, they send money back to their families, mainly through informal channels. In 2021, the World Bank estimated that Nepalis working in India sent home US \$1.58 billion, while Indians working in Nepal remitted US \$1.6 billion, making Nepal the country with one of the highest remittances for India (KNOMAD, 2022).

4. Intra-regional migration dynamics

4.1 Migration pathways

As discussed before in the previous section, Malaysia and GCC countries have been the primary source of employment for over 80 percent of Nepali migrant workers since 2013/14, and have the highest demand for Nepali workers. However, the number of Nepali migrant workers heading to these countries has varied over time⁴.

For instance, in 2015/16 the issuance of new labour approvals for Nepali migrant workers to GCC reached its peak at 3336,614, but in 2016/17 the figure subsequently declined to 272,018 (MoEL,2018). The above figures, however, are incomplete, as renewed approvals for the same destinations are excluded, which, when considered, surpassed 400,000 in both 2017/18 and 2018/19. Similarly, the years 2019/20 and 2020/21 also experienced a significant decrease in the number of Nepali migrant workers heading to GCC countries. Kuwait, for example, saw a pronounced dip in 2020/21 due to a 16-month suspension of migration caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, recent figures i.e., of 2021/22 exhibit an upturn.

Likewise in Malaysia, the approvals for Nepali workers have been inconsistent. For instance, the highest number of approvals was recorded in 2013/14 at 210,099 (MoEL,2018), while the subsequent years witnessed a decline, reaching a low of 9,999 in 2018/19. Malaysia's temporary ban on hiring new foreign migrant workers in March 2016 may relate to the downturn in 2015/16 (127,903 new labour approvals) (MoEL,2018). Furthermore, in May 2018, the Government of Nepal suspended labour approvals to Malaysia to initiate discussions focusing on reducing recruitment fees and related costs for Nepali migrant workers (Mandal, 2019).

These pre-departure fees included payments for online registration with the MiGRANT Management System (MiGRAM), biometric medical tests, services of One Stop Centres (OSCs), and visa fees. This eventually led to the signing of an MoU between the two countries in October 2018. However, despite the MoU, it took another year to restart sending migrant workers to Malaysia due to issues regarding the provision of pre-visa services. The next two years did see a small increment before declining drastically, with the number of approvals issued for Malaysia dropping from 59,705 (including 39,159 new approvals) in 2019/20 to a meagre 1,135 (107 new approvals) in 2020/21. This was directly caused by disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, with bans imposed by Malaysia on migrant workers. Nevertheless, in the first five months of the fiscal year 2022/23, 125,670 new labour permits were issued for Malaysia, according to the National Daily The Kathmandu Post (February 2, 2023). Nepali workers in Malaysia are mostly employed in various industries, such as manufacturing, construction, and security, hosting over 300,000 Nepali employees as of February 2023 (Embassy of Malaysia, 2023).

⁴ See "Where do the Nepali Migrants go?" in Section 2: Recent migration trends, for more details.

4.2 Nepali migrant workers in GCC states

In the past two decades, the flow of migrant labour from South Asia to the Gulf region has grown rapidly, with an estimated 5.3 million workers moving to GCC states in 2015-2016, which has since then increased even further, to work mainly in construction, catering, transport, and domestic service. Historically, most Nepali migrant workers have headed for GCC countries⁵, mainly Qatar (21.6%) and Saudi Arabia (20.4%) (MoLESS, 2020). Substantial recent research has been undertaken on low-paid manual and domestic workers from South and South-East Asia in GCC states (Rahman, 2013; Rajan, 2017; Valenta 2021). Most of this work has centred on the structural problems and negative experiences faced by migrant workers, notably in regard to issues such as abuse and exploitation within the *kafala* (sponsorship and recruitment) system: high death and injury rates; unsafe working conditions; debt bondage and withholding of wages and passports (see for example Auwal 2010; Sönmez et al. 2011); gender-based exploitation involving women domestic workers (Rahman, 2013; Fernandez, 2012); physical and mental health difficulties endured by construction and agricultural workers (Kronfol et al, 2014); political and social exclusion, such as through state restrictions on citizenship and incidents of racism, xenophobia and discrimination (Fargues & Shah, 2018; Jureidini, 2008, 2014); and the damaging impacts of the 2008 financial crisis on job opportunities and security (Buckley, 2012; Fernandez, 2012; Rajan, 2017). Most of these research studies have concentrated on one or two specific themes, rather than on the range of issues experienced by these migrant workers or how they interpret migration as a process (including recruitment, working abroad, and their reflections after returning home).

Nepali migrants living in GCC states have spotlighted most of these concerns, notably on industrial safety, as well as the issue of the workers' sexual health and discrimination (Aryal et al, 2016; Simkhada et al, 2017). Although the bilateral agreements between the GCC states and the Government of Nepal claim to prioritize the safety and security of the workers, many Nepali workers are often reported as facing the most difficult working conditions. For example, in Qatar, as they relocate solely for work, they lack local family ties, are often housed in large compounds, and have low-paid and low-skill employment (de Bel-Air 2017). Among Nepalis in Qatar, 50.7 per cent are in 'general labour' (notably construction), while 8.1 per cent are masons, 7.7 per cent drivers, and less than 5 per cent apiece in cleaning, carpentry, security, and building trades (MoLE, 2016/17). Most Nepali women in the region are employed in cleaning and housekeeping, where some are exposed to domestic violence and sex trafficking (MoLE, 2016/17; Kaufman and Crawford 2011).

⁵ See "Where do the Nepali Migrants go?" in Section 2: Recent migration trends and "Nepali Migrant Workers in GCC States" in Section 4: Intra- regional migration dynamics, for more details.

Following the award of football's 2022 World Cup finals in Qatar, substantial international focus centred on the treatment of this labour force, and in particular on Nepali workers⁶, with media, campaign groups and politicians pointing to high numbers of fatalities and human rights abuses in event-related work. Even during the World Cup finals of 2022, the treatment of migrant workers by Qatari employers became an internationally debated issue and highlighted the plight of vulnerable migrant workers. Despite numerous calls for action from various Human Rights organizations and advocates, the tournament ended with no commitment from FIFA or Qatari authorities to remedy abuses, including unexplained deaths that migrant workers, many of them from Nepal and South Asia suffered to make the sport's biggest tournament possible since the 2022 World Cup was awarded to Qatar in 2010 (Nepali Times, December 18, 2022). According to Amnesty International, around 400,000 workers from Nepal were employed across a range of sectors in Qatar and played a huge part in building the vast infrastructure projects required to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. These workers regularly suffered a range of labour abuses including having to pay illegal recruitment fees to secure their jobs, forced labour and unpaid wages, including at sites linked to the World Cup. Several of the migrants were even reported to have lost their lives due to dangerous working conditions, and their deaths were rarely investigated (Amnesty International, 2022).

4.3 Transnational Migration Industries

A set of literature relates to the transnational migration industries that supply migrant workers. Much of this work has focused on the roles of diverse professional intermediaries or private agents who service migration industries by facilitating transnational flows of labour. The *kafala* system of the Gulf embeds this intermediary role through direct connections between agents and 'sponsoring' employers.

As mentioned before (see section 1.0 of this report), Nepal and Qatar are deeply embedded within the global system of labour migration. According to various studies, at any one time around 10% of Nepali citizens are working abroad (Sharma, et al., 2014; MoLE, 2016/17; Aryal et al. 2016). The vast majority are men (95%) and obtain foreign work permits from recruitment agencies (over 90%) (MoLE, 2016/17). As discussed in sections 1 and 2, remittances from abroad account for more than a quarter of the share of Nepal's annual GDP and are received by over one-fifth of Nepalis at home (NRB, 2022).

Another aspect of the growing trend of Nepali migration is the role of brokers, mainly in the form of recruitment agencies. According to the website of the Department of Foreign Employment, as of March 2024, there are 1593 recruitment agencies registered with the Government of Nepal (DoFE, 2024), out of which 973 are currently active in the recruitment of Nepali workers. These

⁶ For more details, see, The Guardian, "Dark days in Qatar": Nepali workers face bitter legacy of world cup debts. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/dec/20/dark-days-in-qatar-nepali-workers-face-bitter-legacy-of-world-cup-debts>

agencies are mostly private and are commonly known as “man power companies”. Further, it is estimated that over 80,000 unlicensed local agencies operate at the district level. These agencies provide migrant workers with various support related to visas, documentation and travel support and also equip them with skills through training and testing centres (Shivakoti, 2022).

5. Inter-continental migration dynamics

Apart from the countries discussed above, there are also several other destinations that Nepali migrants go to. These destinations are to be found in Europe, Australia, North America and Africa. In the fiscal year 2019/20, the top three destinations for Nepali migrants applying individually were Malta (1,503), Croatia (639), and Portugal (519). In the following fiscal year, Croatia (1,073), Romania (522), and Poland (424) were the preferred destinations, whereas in the fiscal year 2021/22, after Croatia (2,296), the UK (2666) was the most preferred destination for individuals, followed by Poland (1491) (MoLESS, 2022). The sudden elevation in the labour approvals for Nepali migrants going to the UK is largely due to the UK’s decision to opt out of the European Union causing major labour shortages, which resulted in the introduction of various temporary visa schemes for migrant workers. This allowed the migrant workers to work for up to six months in the UK. Another bilateral agreement was signed by Nepal and the UK in 2022 making it possible for Nepali healthcare professionals (nurses) to work in the National Health Service (MoLESS,2022; The Kathmandu Post, August 23, 2022).

The migration destination of Nepali migrants via recruitment agencies provides us with a different narrative. For instance, in the fiscal year 2019/20, Romania (1,442), Cyprus (1,442), and Turkey (502) emerged as the top three destinations for labour approvals via recruitment agencies. From a gender perspective, most of the labour approvals for Romania were for men (1,418), while those going to Cyprus and Turkey were mostly women, with 1,301 and 343 respectively. In the fiscal year 2020/21, Romania (1,428), Cyprus (996) and Turkey (331) continue to lead as the top three emerging destinations in inter-continental migration of Nepalis. However, in the fiscal year 2021/22, there was a visible surge compared to the previous years, with Romania (5,166) and Cyprus (3,211) continuing to be the top two destinations. Croatia, with 1,437 approvals, became the third most preferred destination for Nepali migrants applying individually and through recruitment agencies.

It is important to know who these migrants are, moving to emerging destinations in other continents. In the fiscal year 2021/22, the highest skilled migrants were received by Malta, where, out of the total 1,268 labour approvals, 76.2 per cent were skilled labourers. This was followed by the UK, where out of the total 2,808 labour approvals, 68.7 per cent were skilled labourers. The island nation Seychelles had a high number of both skilled (68%) and semi-skilled (19.7%) labour approvals. Likewise, in the case of Poland 65.1 per cent of the total 1,502 labour approvals were

of skilled labourers. Whereas Croatia received 61.7 percent of skilled migrants out of the total 5,206 labour approvals.

Cyprus received the highest number of labour approvals in the unskilled category. Out of the 3,222 labour approvals, 90.4 per cent were unskilled labour migrants. Similarly, 58.4 per cent of the total 6,418 migrants heading to Romania were unskilled. Turkey and Albania also received a high number of unskilled labour migrants. Out of the 852 labour approvals for Turkey, 49.5 percent were of unskilled migrants. Likewise, out of the total 199 labour approvals for Albania, 47.7 were of unskilled category. Even in countries like the UK (12.6 %), Malta (16.3%), Seychelles (19.7%) and Croatia (29.2%), and Poland (22.7%) a small but significant labour approvals were of unskilled labourers.

As discussed in earlier sections, migration from Nepal is not limited only to labour migrant workers. A significantly large portion of Nepalese going out are students, for whom Canada, Australia, and the UK are the top three inter-continental migration destinations. A news article quoting the No Objection Certificate (NOC) branch under the Minister of Education stated that in the first six months of the fiscal year 2023/24, 12,075 NOCs were issued to students moving to Canada, followed by Australia (9,787 NOCs) and the UK (5,318) (Online Khabar, Jan 30, 2024).

6. Decision-making for migration

The influencing factors and the process of decision-making for migration deserve deeper scrutiny and in-depth studies, as they can be very contextual and multi-faceted. However, there are aspects already highlighted in existing literature. Regmi et al. (2020) state, giving evidence from the district of Chitwan – one of the migration hubs in Nepal as far as the concentration of both internal and aspiring migrants goes – that the most common factors for influencing individual and family migration decision-making behaviours are the number of young males in the family, the education of males and females in the family, and the household wealth. Similarly, other studies (Shrestha, 2017; Sharma, 2019 & 2021; Valenta 2022,) show that the choice of the migration destinations is often seen to be determined by the economic potential of the site, the cost of migration, family and social networks at the destinations, skills of the migrants, and ease of obtaining necessary documents for migration.

Various factors come into play when looking at migration in Nepal, where widespread poverty and lack of opportunities in rural areas are undoubtedly some of the major drivers of this phenomenon. Similarly, better economic opportunities and higher living standards in urban areas and abroad also attract many Nepalis to migrate. There is also a plethora of studies, outlined below, that point to other factors that play an important role in driving rural-urban migration as well as international migration in Nepal.

Social factors: Social factors such as deprivation from various socio-economic opportunities, poor access to social services and weak safety networks are some of the most obvious drivers of migration in Nepal. Additionally, a significant number of people also migrate to access better healthcare or education for themselves or their children (Bista, 2018).

Family and personal factors: Family and personal factors also play vital roles in migration in Nepal. For example, as cited in the Population Census of 2021, individuals may migrate after marriage or to be reunited with family members, or to start a new life with a partner. Additionally, many Nepalis also migrate for personal reasons such as to pursue an education or to escape an unhealthy living situation.

Environmental factors: Environmental factors such as changes in weather patterns and land degradation are also seen to drive migration in Nepal. For example, Sharma (2019) has shown that in some cases changes in weather patterns such as droughts or floods can make it difficult for people to grow crops or maintain their livelihoods and make them move to a different location where they believe they will be able to make a living. Additionally, land degradation due to overuse or deforestation can make it difficult for people to sustain their livelihoods and may also force them to migrate (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2016).

Cultural factors: Cultural factors such as preserving traditional culture and customs may also drive migration in Nepal. For example, people may migrate to preserve traditional customs or cultural practices that are not practiced in their home areas or to be a part of a community that shares their language or culture (Bista, 2018).

Natural disasters: Nepal is susceptible to natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, which can displace communities and result in migration. These occurrences can cause substantial harm to homes and infrastructure, making it challenging for individuals to reconstruct their lives in the same location. For example, Adhikari and Shrestha's (2016) study shows how natural disasters can lead to both short-term and long-term migration in Nepal, as people may temporarily evacuate the affected area and return later or may choose to migrate permanently. The earthquake of 2015 and the flooding that occurs each year also have resulted in many families migrating to other locations, sometimes having to leave everything they own behind.

Economic factors: As discussed in different sections throughout this paper and as mentioned in numerous studies, the search for better economic opportunities is by far the most significant driver of migration for the people of Nepal. This is true for both internal migration (mostly rural to urban areas) as well for international migration (mostly in the case of migration for foreign employment). Existence of a high rate of poverty, high unemployment rate, and lack of decent employment opportunities – both on-farm and off-farm – prompt tens and thousands of Nepalis, especially youths, to seek out more favourable economic prospects in urban regions or overseas every year (Sharma et al., 2014; Sharma, 2019). Be it the seasonal migrants to India or those who venture

on to a long-term labour contract to other countries, the economic factor works as both a push and a pull factor for these migrants.

Political instability: Another factor, not much studied but largely felt by and discussed among the Nepalis, is the role of political instability and mistrust and the resulting disenchantment and mistrust towards political leadership, which is influencing the displacement and migration of thousands of individuals. Be it in the name of conflict-induced migration (both internal and international), especially during the Maoist-led armed insurgency during 1996–2006, or because of the frequent political unrests that continued after that which have disrupted the livelihoods of a large portion of the population, there is deep resentment and mistrust toward the political establishment among Nepali citizens. Since the abolishment of the Monarchy and establishment of the federal republic in 2028, there have been 15 different governments, indicating the fragility and uncertainty of the system in place. This feeling is compounded by the fact that the economy continues to be in the doldrums, there exists rampant corruption (Nepal ranks 110 out of 180 countries in the list of Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International in 2022), and there is very little inspiration to be had from the existing political leadership. Thapa (2018) has tried to establish this connection by claiming that when people's livelihoods are endangered in the name of politics or through politicization, many individuals choose to migrate to other areas where they feel they will be safer and have more opportunities. This may be difficult to measure but it is certainly an issue worth pursuing.

7. Discussion

Several key themes and trends stand out from this report. First, migration in the current world has become an integral component of livelihoods for millions of people around the globe, especially for people from developing countries such as Nepal. The increasing significance of migration, especially that of foreign labour migration, can be studied not only from the lens of the migrants themselves (in terms of the impacts on them and their families, their search for better employment opportunities, etc.) but also from the perspective of the state. In Nepal's case, for example, the State is playing a facilitating role (by supporting the aspiring migrants to find foreign employment and leave the country legally) and thereby also receiving a very important reserve of foreign currency in the form of remittances sent back by these migrants.

Nepal's situation is an interesting case for studying the changing migration dynamics and its drivers for the unprecedented and historical changes Nepalis have witnessed in the last two to three decades. Politically, the country has transformed itself from a monarchical to a multiparty federal structure. In the aftermath of the armed insurgency led by the Maoist rebels during 1996-2006, the monarchy was abolished, the Maoists rebels were brought into the mainstream politics,

and a new Constitution was promulgated in 2015 that gave the country a new governing structure in the form of federalism for the first time in its history.

There have been equally significant changes on the socio-economic front. The agrarian system, which has been the backbone of Nepal's economy for all these years, for example, has undergone profound changes, in part due to the political changes and the new state of affairs that has come into place as an output of these changes (Sharma et al, 2014). This change in agriculture is also seen as one consequence of the ever-increasing upsurge in rural-to-urban and international labour migration. Mobility of the population, particularly away from rural and traditionally agricultural areas, has increased sharply. As a result, increasing numbers of people are becoming less dependent on farm production for their livelihoods.

This rural-to-urban migration has also changed other elements of the socio-cultural and demographic fabrics of the nation. For one, Nepal has now become one of the fastest urbanizing countries, with the number of urban municipalities has increased from 58 in 2011 to 293 in 2017 (MoFAGA, 2023). This has come both as an outcome of rural-to-urban migration and as a direct result of the reclassification of urban areas by the government in recent years. Consequently, the urban population has increased by the rate of 40 per cent, one of the fastest in the region.

The continuing upsurge of internal migration has left a lasting impact on much of the rural landscape in Nepal, one area that can be studied from different dimensions. If on one hand, the social structure has changed drastically with only the elderly and the children – creating 'toothless villages' in the process, on the other it has also contributed to low agricultural productivity, rapid urbanization, and a severe lack of secure livelihood options and employment opportunities, that is in turn driving these migrants, especially the youth, to foreign countries for labour work. Urban areas are often stepping stones to go abroad for foreign employment. The demand for this is so high that the State has established a Department of Foreign Employment since 2008 under the Ministry of Labour and Employment as the sole and official entity for monitoring foreign employment. There are thousands of 'manpower agencies' that work across the country to assist the eager population to go out of the country. Judging by the mushrooming of these agencies, one can safely presume that they are significantly benefitting monetarily, thanks to the high amount of fees the aspiring labour migrants have to pay for the process.

Foreign labour migration has thus become a non-separable phenomenon for the Nepali population at large. A large number of households have at least one of their members working abroad. And this trend will most likely will continue for some more years if there are no more global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or large-scale conflicts. However, this labour migration has been seen also as a double-edged sword for the Nepali communities. Some studies have shown that migrant worker remittances offer largely short-term boosts for family, local and national economies, but can jeopardize food security and sustainable trade and export industries in the long-term (Maharjan et al. 2012; Sharma et al. 2014). As working-age adults (especially men) migrate for work, they leave behind 'toothless villages', largely inhabited by the elderly or

children, while remaining working-age women often take on dual labour roles, on the land and in raising families. Rural women already undertook extensive manual agricultural labour in addition to household work, and with their sons and husbands away, they are now required to take on the share of the agricultural work previously undertaken by men. This additional work has added a tremendous burden to these women in rural areas and, in turn, is making agriculture less and less attractive, with more and more women from those areas now looking for other livelihood options and migrating for foreign employment. Another increasingly visible trend in this era of the remittance economy has been that regarding the returnee migrants, who, after having spent several years abroad as foreign labourers, find it difficult to return to agriculture, their traditional source of livelihood. Many of these youths, having seen the outside world and experienced other livelihood options, often see agriculture as a traditional, mundane, and low-yield profession, particularly after having experienced the livelihood alternatives and consumer values found in urban cities and having learned, presumably, new skills and knowledge while working abroad. For these youths, the value of land is not as it used to be for their forefathers, and they would rather rent out or even sell their land than continue with agriculture as their main profession (Sharma et al. 2014 f).

Amidst this discussion, it is important to note that the most vulnerable and the poorest of the population cannot even afford to migrate, and some families simply would not have spare members to undertake rural-to-urban migration. These families, therefore, have no access to cash income through remittances, and for them finding other forms of decent livelihood options is extremely difficult. As the agriculture sector becomes less productive and less attractive, the poorest of the poor, especially from rural areas, are compelled to continue living in a state of chronic poverty in very harsh conditions.

Migration and its changing landscape are no doubt bringing new opportunities for those who are able to migrate, especially to countries other than India. While some of the drivers of migration have remained the same (such as for search of employment), there are some new trends evolving that need more in-depth studies to understand (such as youth disenchantment and social pressure). Also interesting is the fact that there are more and more destinations emerging in recent years. While countries in South East Asia and the Middle East do remain popular destinations for migrant workers, there are emerging places in Eastern Europe and other parts of Asia that show signs of attracting more and more Nepalis. What they do there, and how they have become the choices of the Nepalis are some areas where more research is needed.

By any comparison though, it is the neighbouring country India that has attracted most of the Nepali migrants over the years. In addition, given its proximity to Nepal, the cultural affinity and the relatively lower costs and paperwork associated with moving, mobility to India including for seasonal work is seen to be preferable for many workers, particularly from bordering regions in the west of Nepal. Thanks to the open border policy the two countries have adopted, there are hundreds and thousands of Nepalis working in India, although the actual number is not available,

nor is there any detailed account of what the Nepalis are doing in different parts of India. There is much to be studied vis-à-vis Nepali migration to India, such as the volume of migration, employment characteristics, remittance behaviour, and common vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers.

Migration unleashes many possibilities, but it also comes with many challenges and risks. Understanding its potential and associated risks becomes critical for creating and developing sustainable migration pathways for the millions of Nepali youths who aspire to have better and safer livelihood opportunities.

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