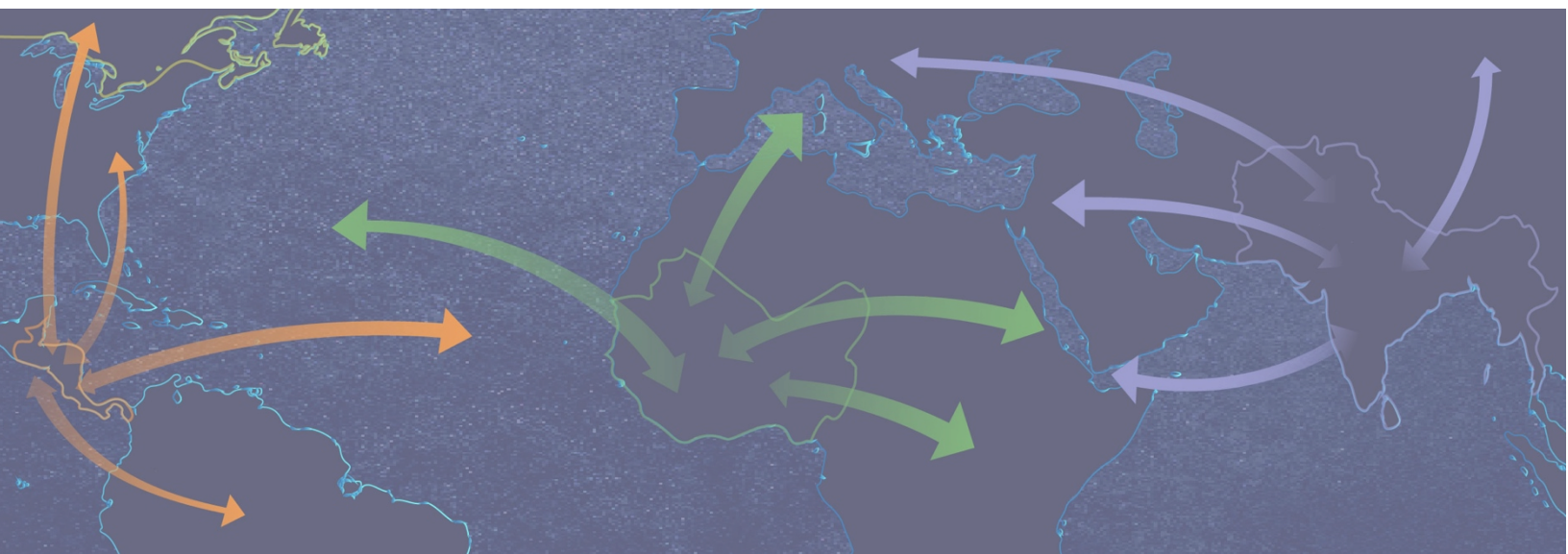


MEMO

Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective



Regional report Characteristics, flows and drivers of migration: The South Asian scenario

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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



Regional report

Characteristics, flows and drivers of migration: The South Asian scenario

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1.0 Introduction

For decades, migration has been an integral part of the socio-economic landscape of South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Various forms of migration are visible in the region including within and beyond borders, forced and voluntary, regular and irregular as well as temporary and permanent migration. While South Asian countries primarily serve as source countries, they also function as destinations for certain groups of migrants: Bangladesh hosts Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and India hosts economic migrants from Nepal and refugees from Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan.

Internal migration is the predominant form of movement across most of the South Asian countries (Srivastava and Pandey, 2017). However, there is hardly any comparable data on internal migration in South Asia. Simultaneously, international migration is also extremely significant for these countries, with 15 per cent of the global migrant population originating from South Asia (Rajan, 2017). Moreover, these countries rank among the top 20 recipients of remittances, highlighting their central role in global migration dynamics. Country-specific studies demonstrate the intricate nature of migration flows within and from the region. This report captures the migration scenario of South Asian countries, with special emphasis on Nepal, Bangladesh, and India. It is based on available secondary materials such as published books, journal articles, commissioned reports, country-specific government data, and unpublished grey materials.

The report is divided into six sections. Section 1 attempts to identify major characteristics of migration within and from South Asia. Section 2 documents the migration flow of these countries. Section 3 presents the findings of a range of studies on factors that drive different types of migration from the region. Section 4 identifies the role of intermediaries and policy structures in shaping migrants' journeys. Section 5 discusses the challenges of navigating migration from and within South Asian countries. It also highlights the opportunities of migration experienced by these countries. Additionally, this section identifies the major research questions still unexplored about South Asian migration, specifically in respect to drivers of migration. Finally, Section 6 summarises the paper's major findings.

2.0 Major Characteristics and Flow

South Asia accounts for around 25 per cent of the global population. India, the world's second most populous country (Rajan, 2017), accounts for 75 per cent of the South Asian population. Pakistan accounts for 11 per cent and Bangladesh a little more than nine per cent, with the remaining five per cent in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. While some common characteristics define migration flow from and within South Asia, there are also country-specific patterns and trends, which will be further elaborated in this chapter.

Figure 2.1: Map of South Asia



Source: United Nations, 2011

2.1 Internal migration

Internal migration consists of permanent, semi-permanent, and temporary or seasonal flows. Comparison of internal migration across the countries in South Asia is difficult as different definitions and jurisdictional approaches to enumerate migrants are used. Rural-to-urban migration dominates the migration landscape. The exceptions are India and Nepal where rural-to-rural migration is predominant, due mainly to associational and marriage-related migration flows. Rural-to-urban migration in India is primarily for employment opportunities (Srivastava, 2011). Migrants work in various formal urban sectors like manufacturing, construction, and services (Deshingkar, 2006), as well as in informal sectors such as small business, petty trading, vendors, open food stalls, and so on. In 2001, internal migration in India was at 301 million. The 2011 census data shows that this number rose to 450 million, comprising 37 per cent of the country's population; 62 per cent of the flow occurred within the same district, 26 per cent between districts within the same state, and only 12 per cent of movement was inter-state.

The Bangladesh census does not track the total flow of internal or international migration. Here, too, rural-to-urban migration is the most dominant form of internal movement, contributing two-thirds of the growth of the urban population (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In Pakistan, according to the Labour Force Survey, Pakistan 1996-1997, 43 per cent of internal migration is urban-to-urban, and 30 per cent is rural-to-urban (Khan and Shehnaz, 2000). In 2001, this figure stood at 8.6 million; that same year, Sri Lanka had 4.1 million internal migrants, mostly rural-to-urban.

Sex-segregated data on internal migration is only available for India. The majority of the internal migrants are women (Srivastava and Pandey, 2017). The ratio of male and female migration stands at 1,000 women for every 422 men. The higher participation of females is mainly because of marriage migration, which constitutes 65 per cent of total female migration. Just 3.2 per cent of females migrate for work, compared to 37 per cent of males (Srivastava and Pandey, 2017).

In Bangladesh, the creation of new employment opportunities in urban centres is the main reason behind rural-to-urban migration (GoB, 2020). Two mega cities in Bangladesh, Dhaka and Chattogram, are the most important destinations for poor migrants. Since the 1980s, Bangladesh is also experiencing a rise in female migration for employment. Females work in formal sector jobs in manufacturing and construction, as well as many other types of informal sector jobs (Rashid, 2013). For Pakistan, Karachi is the main receiving city for rural-to-urban migrants, while Peshawar is the destination for urban-to-urban migrants. In Sri Lanka, young persons from rural areas migrate to cities mainly to work in free-trade zones and the informal sector (Wickramasekara, 2010; Ranathunga, 2011). Contrary to South Asian countries, rural-to-urban migration in Sri Lanka is dominated by women (Ranathunga, 2011).

Two-thirds of internal migration from Nepal is from rural-to-rural. People from poor rural hill regions migrate to the more agriculturally fertile rural Tarai region. A Nepal Migration Survey highlights

that rural-to-urban migration is also rising (Srivastava and Pandey, 2017), driven largely by employment prospects. Kathmandu and Pokhara are the two main destinations. The urban informal sector, especially carpet and readymade garment factories, attracts workers from low-income rural households. In the 1990s, 0.2 million workers were employed in carpet factories and 0.1 million were working in readymade garment factories (Adhikari, 2013). Both sectors faced major challenges since 2015, with export earnings of woollen carpet and readymade garments declining 8.3 and 9.7 per cent, respectively, in the year 2017 (The Kathmandu Post 2017). However, since 2021-2022 this has been gradually increasing again (Pandey, 2022). Nepal was historically governed by a series of royal dynasties until the early 1990s. Following a turbulent period of street protests, multiparty democracy was restored in May 1991. Again, Nepal endured a civil war from 1996 to 2006. The war was launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in February 1996 with the aim of overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a communist government. During the ten-year civil war, 200,000 individuals and families were displaced from their homes (UNOHCHR, 2012). The Maoist Movement ended by signing the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) on 21 November 2006.

Researchers often argue that the migration trend towards urban locations in the context of South Asian countries is a result of urban bias in development policies (Ahmad et al., 2013; Khan and Shehnaz, 2000; Siddiqui et al. 2020; Siddiqui, 2022b). In general, the direction of internal migration in South Asian countries is strongly influenced by the pattern of regional development. It takes place mainly from impoverished areas to more economically advanced or developed ones. Deshingkar and Grimm (2005) argue that internal migration in South Asia is more important than international migration in terms of both volume and flow of remittances. Besides, internal migration involves a larger number of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bhagat, 2012; Srivastava, 2011, 2012a; Srivastava and Pandey, 2017; Afsar, 2003; Acharya, 2010).

2.2 Cross-Border population movements

Cross-border migration within South Asia was extremely high in the late 1940s. When the British decolonised the Indian subcontinent, three independent states emerged—India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—alongside Nepal.¹ Communal riots and preferences shown by the people led to a mass exodus between India and Pakistan largely based on religion and arbitrarily drawn borders. This migration between India and Pakistan gradually tapered off. Movement between India and the then-Pakistan was relatively easy before the 1965 war, but subsequently became severely restricted (Siddiqui, 2022a).

In 1971, through a war of liberation, East Pakistan became an independent state with a new name, Bangladesh. A similar strict visa regime continued among the newly independent Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Bangladesh and India share a 4,096-kilometre border. As part of both British India and Pakistan, Bangladesh inherited a long population movement legacy.

¹ Nepal was never a part of the British Colony.

Migration between the two states could thus not be stopped by strict visa regimes (Siddiqui, 2022a). The major migration flow, particularly of the economically less solvent population from border areas, has been irregular in nature. The government of India refers to migration from Bangladesh under two broad heads. Migration of the Bangladeshi Hindu population is termed as refugee flow, whereas migration of the Muslim population is categorised as economic. Such a demarcation, however, misrepresents the drivers of migration for Hindus and Muslims. Marriage, student, and voluntary migration spurred by desire to access more economic, cultural, and religious opportunities also cause migration flows among Hindus and Muslims to both India and Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 2022a). There are hardly any credible data on the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India and Indian migrants in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh has always denied that there is a major flow of economic migration to India. Migration does take place, but it is not unidirectional. Moreover, it merely represents the normal migration pattern that exists between any two neighbouring countries.

Over the last 30 years, a significant number of Indian migrants has also been working in Bangladesh. They are mostly skilled and professional workers. There is no firm figure regarding their number, but the remittance flow from Bangladesh to India offers an idea of the extent of their participation. India is the largest remittance-receiving country in the world. According to the State Bank of India, Bangladesh has been either the fourth or fifth largest remittance source country for India in various years. Indian migrants who work in Bangladesh annually remit around USD five billion to India (Siddiqui, 2022a). Since 2000 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, informal labour migration from Bangladesh to India became highly securitised (Siddiqui, 2022a). Bangladesh hosts around 965,467 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (UNHCR, Undated), with an additional 250,000 unregistered Rohingya refugees residing outside camps.

Under a friendship treaty with India, since 1950 Nepal allows visa-free movement between India and Nepal. It is estimated that between three and four million Nepalese are living and working in India and around 700,000 Indian workers are in Nepal (Sharma, 2022). During the 1990s, some 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese citizens fled Bhutan and took refuge in Nepal and 15,000 more fled to India due to the promulgation of a discriminatory clause in the Bhutanese constitution, persecution, and rape (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Many Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees remain in Nepal. Between 2007 and 2016, more than 113,500 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal were resettled in third countries, including the United States and Canada (Bhandari, 2023).

During the civil war in Sri Lanka that began in 1983, a large number of Tamil populations moved to India due to the fear of persecution. Around 100,000 Sri Lankans of Tamil origin are still in different parts of the Tamilnadu state of India.² During the economic turmoil of then-president Raja Pakshe's rule in 2021, a new stream of movement of Sri Lankan Tamils to India occurred due to

²In 2021, 58,843 Sri Lankan Tamils had been residing in 108 refugee camps of Tamil Nadu. Besides and some 34,135 refugees had been staying outside the camp, Home Ministry of India (Sri Lanka Tamils fleeing to India to escape economic crisis- Krithiga Narayanan, Tamil Nadu (May 24, 2022).

severe shortages of essential items, including food, fuel, medicine, and low foreign reserves. During the 1990s, Pakistan also experienced a major refugee flow, with more than five million Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan. In 2022, Pakistan hosted more than 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees and 427,000 in 'refugee-like situations'.¹³

2.3 Inter-regional migration

Major inter-regional migration from South Asia is primarily towards the Gulf states and other Arab, Southeast, and East Asian countries. In the late 1960s, with rising oil prices, the Gulf states and other Arab countries underwent major infrastructural development for which they needed labour. This attracted various categories of workers, both skilled and unskilled, initially from India and Pakistan and then gradually from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan. In the 1980s, such migration gradually expanded to newly industrialised countries of East and Southeast Asia. The nature of this migration is qualitatively different from migration to the Europe and North America. In many Gulf states and other Arab countries, the immigration policy framework generally does not include provisions for granting permanent residency to foreign nationals. Instead, these countries often rely on temporary work visas tied to employment contracts or sponsorship by a local employer – a system known as *Kafil* – under which workers must return to their origin countries after the contract period. By contrast, migration to Europe and North America is often motivated by achieving permanent residency.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, migration flows from South Asia to the Gulf and other destinations came to a standstill (ADB, OECD, ILO, 2023). By 2022, migration flows had to picked up again, and in the case of some countries exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Overall, migration from the main South Asian origin countries more than doubled in 2022, totalling 4.6 million – a 114 per cent increase. Indicatively, in 2022 migration towards the Gulf and Arab states from Nepal and Pakistan increased 384 and 189 per cent, respectively, compared to the previous year (ADB, OECD, ILO, 2023). Bangladesh saw a 84 per cent increase in migration flow from the year 2021 to 2022, replacing the Philippines as the largest labour origin country in South Asia.

Saudi Arabia was the key destination, receiving more than 600,000 overseas workers from Bangladesh in 2022. According to the most recent data, over 40,000 workers from Bangladesh found employment in Saudi Arabia in January 2023 (RMMRU, 2023). Pakistan was the second main country of origin for workers in Saudi Arabia in 2022, with 515,000 Pakistani workers registered for employment. Placements from India and Nepal to Saudi Arabia involved, respectively, 180,000 and 125,000 workers (ADB, OECD, ILO, 2023).

¹³People in a refugee-like situation refers to a category includes groups of people who are outside their country of origin and face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/17767-unhcr-provides-cash-assistance-to-over-1-million-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan.html>

The number of women migrant workers varies among countries, with Sri Lanka having the highest at 30 to 40 per cent, followed by Bangladesh (10 per cent) and Nepal (8 per cent). In 2022, women comprised under two and one per cent, respectively, of migrant workers from India and Pakistan due to various restrictions and clearance requirements. In the case of Pakistan, there are restrictions on the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled females; only women over the age of 35 years are allowed to migrate overseas for domestic work (Khan, 2020). India also has age restrictions, allowing only women 30 years of age or older to migrate for domestic work through designated state-run agencies (ILO, 2024).

For Sri Lanka, the share of women fell from 43 per cent in 2019 to 34 per cent in 2021. During this period, Sri Lanka eased restrictions on the migration of females (Weeraratne, 2023). In June 2013, the Family Background Report (FBR) policy, introduced Circular 13/2013 to prevent mothers of children under the age of five years from working abroad. Initially the FBR directive was applicable only to domestic workers but in 2015 was extended to cover all females seeking foreign employment in any occupation. The directive imposed destination-country specific minimum age barriers to females who aspired to migrate: the age of 25 years for Saudi Arabia, 23 for the Gulf and other Arab states, and 21 for all other countries. The FBR policy also set an upper age limit, barring females over 55 years of age from migrating. In August 2015, the upper age limit was lowered to 50 years and further reduced to 45 years in 2017 (Weeraratne 2023). In June 2022, during the economic crisis, to promote migration and increase remittances, the minimum age requirement for children was lowered in the policy from five to two years. With the economy rebounding, the Sri Lankan Minister of Labour and Foreign Employment announced that domestic workers would not be sent abroad as from March 2023. These policy shifts only demonstrate the patriarchal character prevalent in South Asian states. For example, when Sri Lanka needed to boost its economy, it eased restrictions on female migration, but once domestic conditions began to improve, the government reimposed restrictions on the migration of females under and over certain age or having children under the age of five years.

It is understood that a section of workers from South Asian countries also migrate through irregular paths (Mahmood, 2011). Data on individual countries presented in this report do not capture the movement of irregular migrants.

2.4 South Asian diaspora

Most South Asian countries have a strong diaspora population residing in developed industrialised countries. In this paper, 'diaspora' is defined as communities of migrants settled permanently in and owing allegiance to host countries while at the same time aware of their origin and identity and maintaining varying degrees of linkage with their countries of origin. Except Nepal, the history of the diaspora to a great extent is linked with South Asia's colonial past.

Chain migration, a process through which immigrants sponsor their family members to join them in a new country, is a common characteristic of South Asian diaspora expansion. The British

practice of indentured labour also contributed to the creation of the Indian diaspora. However, conflicts in the post-colonial era added to creation of a strong diaspora in South Asian countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. By far, India has the largest diaspora population, not only among South Asian countries but in the world. There are over three million people of Indian origin in the United States, comprising one per cent of its total population. In 2019, there were around 1,344,000 non-resident Indians (NRI) in the top ten U.S. destinations: California, New York, Texas, Florida, Utah, Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Washington D.C. and Boston (Budiman, 2024).⁴ Millions of people of Indian origin have settled elsewhere around the globe, for example, 18.25 million in the United Kingdom, 15.60 million in Africa, 4.96 million in Australia, 3.15 million in Fiji, 2.97 million in Guyana, 2.35 million in the Netherlands, 2.0 million in New Zealand, 1.97 million in Italy, 1.54 million in Suriname, 1.46 million in Germany, 1.20 million in the Philippines, and 1.09 million in France (Government of India, 2018). Panjab has been the major source region for migration to the United Kingdom, specifically, from two villages, Jalandhar and Mirpur. After the Partition, Mirpur came under Pakistan and Jalandhar to India.

The Nepali diaspora is spread across the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe. There is no definite figure for the Nepali diaspora. Adhikari (2022) estimates that in 2022 around 800,000 people of Nepali origin may have settled in different parts of the developed world. Around 250,000 Nepalese are residing in North America, mostly in the United States and Canada, and 250,000 are in Europe. Among the European countries, the United Kingdom is the major destination country. The distinct feature of the formation of the Nepali diaspora in the United Kingdom is through the participation of the Gurkha tribe of Nepal in the British army. Along with other immigrants, ex-Gurkha soldiers constitute a substantive chunk of the Nepali diaspora. Oceania is another rapidly growing destination for Nepali migrants, with many students going to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji then opting for permanent residency (Adhikari, 2022).

The United Kingdom concentrates the largest Bangladeshi diaspora. During the British colonial period, many people from the territory that now constitutes Bangladesh joined the British Merchant Navy. A large proportion of them 'jumped ship' and settled in different port cities across England. The term 'ship jumpers' refer to sailors who left their ships without permission while in foreign waters or ports to work irregularly or seek asylum. In 2020, there were an estimated 590,832 people of Bangladeshi origin in the United Kingdom (UN DESA, 2020). Based on the 2011 British census, 52 per cent of Bangladeshis were British-born (Office of National Statistics, 2021). The UK also has the largest Bengali population outside of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Greater London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, and Bedfordshire have significant Bangladeshi populations. The greatest concentration of people of Bangladeshi origin is in London,

⁴ MPI also tabulated this figure from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2015-19 ACS.

particularly in the Tower Hamlets borough of East London. Other cities with a large number of people of Bangladeshi origin are Birmingham, Oldham, and Luton.

According to the latest figures from the U.S. Census in 2020, the Bangladeshi American community stands at 261,885. However, informal estimates suggest that there should be at least half a million people of Bangladeshi origin in the United States (Budiman, 2024; UN DESA, 2020). Historically, Bangladeshi immigrants began arriving in the United States in large numbers in the early 1970s. Since then, the Bangladeshi community has grown rapidly to the extent that it is the fastest-growing ethnic community, with concentrations of Bangladeshi origin people in metropolitan areas in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Great Lakes regions. The largest group of Bangladeshi origin resides in New York (121,601), followed by Michigan (30,000), New Jersey, Texas, California, and Pennsylvania. There are smaller concentrations of Bangladeshi-origin populations in Texas, California, and Nevada (Budiman, 2024). The people of Bangladeshi origin live mostly cities: 93,000 in New York city, followed by Detroit, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami, and Boston.

A recently emerged destination for Bangladeshis is Italy. According to the UN DESA (2020), 400,000 Bangladeshis have migrated to Italy since the 1990s. During the initial stage, most were from Shariatpur, and their flow was driven by chain migration. While initially many migrated irregularly, they later regularised their status and sponsored family members through family reunification programmes. Besides these, three major destinations, there are 300,000 people of Bangladeshi origin in Africa. Canada has also become an important destination with 100,000 people of Bangladeshi origin residing in Canada. Countries hosting Bangladeshi-origin populations include Greece (80,000), Australia (41,233), Japan (40,000), Spain (30,000), Poland (18,000), Germany (15,710), France (14,400), Sweden (12,965), and Finland (7,000) (UN DESA, 2020).

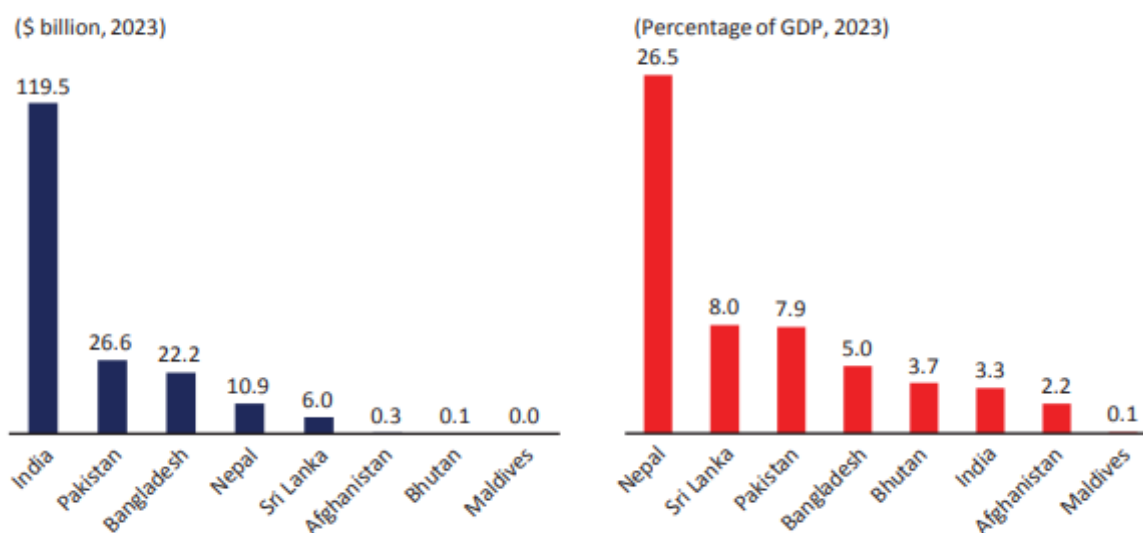
Generally, South Asian workers are broadly classified as highly skilled/professionals, skilled, semi-skilled, and less skilled/unskilled workers.⁵ From 2019 to 2021, half of the total flow of workers is from the skilled category. Again, in 2022, the number of semi-skilled workers and those in elementary occupations more than tripled. In 2022, one-third of total Sri Lankan workers was absorbed in less skilled/unskilled occupations. Of the 300,000 Sri Lankans who migrated for work, more than 100,000 workers were in less skilled/unskilled occupations, 74,000 were domestic workers, and 88,000 were skilled workers. Nepal has not experienced such a trend. The share of workers in elementary occupations steadily decreased from 60 per cent in 2017/2018 to 45 per cent in 2021/2022 (ADB, OECD and ILO 2023). In 2022, for the first time skilled workers outnumbered less skilled/unskilled workers in Nepal.

⁵During the colonial period, migration in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka came under the 1922 immigration law. During the 1980s, these countries framed new immigration laws particularly to govern labour migration to the Gulf states. These immigration laws categorised the workers more or less similarly as highly skilled/professionals, skilled, semi-skilled, and less skilled/unskilled.

2.5 Remittances

For decades, South Asia has been the largest recipient of remittances among different regions of Asia. In 2023, India received USD 119.5 billion as remittances. Pakistan is the second largest remittance-receiving country in South Asia (USD 26.6 billion), followed by Bangladesh (USD 22.2 billion), Nepal (USD 10.9 billion), Sri Lanka (USD 6 billion), Afghanistan (USD 0.3 billion), and Bhutan (USD 0.1 billion). Remittances from international workers constitute 26.5 per cent of GDP for Nepal (Sharma, 2022), 8 per cent for Sri Lanka, 7.9 per cent for Pakistan, and 5 per cent for Bangladesh. For Bhutan, India, and Afghanistan, remittances are less than 4 per cent of GDP.

Figure 2.5.1: Top Remittance Recipients in South Asia, 2023



Sources: World Bank/KNOMAD staff and International Monetary Fund's *World Economic Outlook* April 2024.
 Note: GDP = gross domestic product.

This section demonstrates that internal migration is the dominant movement in South Asia, with a large number of males and females from low economic backgrounds migrating for work mostly in informal economies. Cross-border population movement in South Asia is linked with these countries' colonial past. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers move within India and Nepal under official treaty. Population movements for livelihood in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan do take place but are mostly irregular in nature. Almost all the South Asian countries participate in short-term contract migration to Gulf, other Arab, East and Southeast Asian countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, this movement involved predominantly males, but now draws females too, mostly for domestic work. These countries also have diaspora populations.

3.0 Drivers of migration in the South Asian region

Srivastava and Pandey (2017) divided the drivers of internal migration in South Asia under five broad themes: employment, marriage, accompanying family members, education, and displacement. Across the South Asian countries, internal migration for employment-related reasons is generally important for males, except for Sri Lanka; the major flow of female migration is predominantly driven by marriage and familial association.

3.1 Drivers of internal migration

For 20 per cent of internal migrants in India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, employment was the main reason for migration, whereas 26.4 per cent of migrants in Bhutan and 31.7 percent in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2012) identified employment as a reason for migration. Employment-related migration has increased from 19.85 million in 1991 to 28.9 million in 2001 (Srivastava, 2011). In Bangladesh, a recent survey of 2,505 households in districts of Bangladesh found that 71 per cent of rural-to-urban migration is linked to employment – that is, livelihoods and better wages (The Daily Star, 2024). Greater employment opportunities in urban centres after economic liberalisation has often been considered as the main cause of rural-to-urban labour migration in the country (Afsar, 2003).

In Sri Lanka, employment-related migration accounted for around 20.4 per cent of total internal movements, followed by marriage and family migration. Displacement is also an important reason for internal migration in Sri Lanka. High unemployment in rural areas also leads to the migration of females to urban export-processing zones (Ranathunga, 2011). In Pakistan, 43 per cent of movements result from associational migration, i.e., marriage migration and migration of minor children (Srivastava and Pandey, 2017). Working in agricultural fields is an important reason for migration and partly explains the high rural-to-rural migration in Nepal. Employment-related migration occurs mainly from agriculturally poor hill regions to the agriculturally developed Tarai region. According to the Pakistan Migration Report, the country has a large number of internally displaced persons: five million by conflict and sectoral violence since 2004 and 15 million due to natural disasters across the country (ICMPD, 2013).

Srivastava and Pandey (2017) found that the stock of internal migrants in South Asia is dominated by females. This is because of the change of residence of females due to marriage. Autonomous female migration for employment is also increasing in India (Shanthi, 2006) and Bangladesh (Rashid, 2013). In Bangladesh, independent female migration to urban locations is driven by opportunities in both formal manufacturing industries as well as informal sector jobs (Rashid, 2013). By contrast, internal employment-related migration in Pakistan is male-dominated. Sri Lanka is the only country in South Asia where females dominate the rural-to-urban migration flow. The majority of those employed in the urban manufacturing sector in Sri Lanka are female.

3.2 Drivers of diaspora migration

Drivers of diaspora migration from South Asia are also diverse. Following the abolition of slavery, the British created a system of indentured labour, shipping thousands of workers from South Asia to different parts of their colonies as well as to the colonies of other countries. The presence of people of Indian origin in Fiji, Surinam, and Guyana are some examples of indentured labourers staying and creating their own communities there. As mentioned earlier, some South Asian workers in the British Navy jumped ships, establishing the first generation of South Asians in the United Kingdom and the United States.

In post-colonial times, immigration policies of industrial countries play a major role in determining who will stay or live in these countries. During the 1960s, when the UK government required a supply of cheap labour in the newly emerging textile industries, the authorities advertised the work visa opportunities in newspapers. Many early migrants of Indian origin who were already residing in the United Kingdom brought over their family members under such a programme (Singhvi et al., 2001; Siddiqui, 2004).

Governments and the universities of developed countries offer various types of scholarships for higher studies. For example, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Ford Foundation scholarship are among prominent programmes that allowed a substantive number of highly educated professionals of South Asia to enter the United Kingdom and United States. Although international students initially went to study with the intention of returning to their countries of origin, a significant number instead sought citizenship or permanent residency where they studied or migrated to other countries (Khadria, 2005).

Since the 1980s, visa regimes providing work opportunities to the less skilled/unskilled workers have been significantly curtailed. Consequently, for a less skilled migrant from South Asia aspiring to migrate, the most possible path was through a 'family reunification' visa. On one hand, there are restrictions on the migration of low-skilled workers; on the other, since 2000, developed countries have designed policies to attract highly skilled knowledge workers from all over the world, including South Asia. Countries like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have opened pathways for international students to provide work permits and later permanent residency. Many countries changed their earlier policy of sending students back to their countries of origin after attaining the degree. Due to these shifts, students could apply for jobs or remain for a certain period after completing their studies to look for jobs. Subsequently, they could apply for permanent residency if they met the requirements.

This section on drivers shows marriage is a major determinant of internal female migration, whereas employment is the major driver of male migration in South Asia. Education migration is also quite prominent here. Immigration policies of developed countries play a major role in determining who will migrate. Highly skilled workers are attracted by these countries through

incentives. Higher education is another path for future permanent migration for many South Asians.

4.0 Role of Intermediaries

Along with the government, there are many private sector actors that mediate between potential employers and workers or potential international students and post-secondary institutions, both at origin and destination. Intermediaries are often stereotypically portrayed as an untrustworthy, immoral group of persons who entice migrants into exploitative conditions for their own gain (Doezema, 2010). However, some migration researchers look at intermediaries differently. Their research demonstrates that labour intermediaries enhance migrant workers' ability to navigate complex and volatile labour markets (Srivastava and Pandey 2017; Siddiqui and Abrar, 2019). Intermediaries include registered recruiting agencies, sub-agents, brokers, suppliers, contractors, among others. In all types of migration – be it internal, cross-border, inter-regional, or inter-continental – intermediaries play the corresponding role. Some intermediaries have license to perform a recruitment role, but sub-agents mostly do not have legal permission to recruit and work mostly informally.

4.1 Intermediaries operational at internal and cross-border migration:

In the case of internal migration, the nature of the intermediary varies based on the type of workers required. In India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, labour contractors known as *Thikadars* supply workers per demand. In India, different suppliers/sub-agents, known as *Dalals*, cater to sectors such as domestic work, waste collection, seasonal agriculture, and so on. Similarly, in both India and Bangladesh, intermediaries operational in the brick clines are known as *Sardars*. Separate suppliers (*Thikadars*) operate in earth works (digging soil for road construction, embankment, etc.) and recruit young males for jobs in the hotels and restaurants.

Intermediaries' functions differ regarding cross-border migration. With respect to Bangladeshi domestic workers in Delhi, Siddiqui (2005) found that there are different layers of intermediaries. In Delhi, it is the young married couples who often migrate together. Males migrate to work in waste collection and females in domestic work. Along with the Delhi Municipal Corporation, local *thikadars* manage one-sixth of waste collection, primarily relying on Bangladeshi male workers because of the caste system. Aside from the *Horizon* (Schedule caste), Indians of other castes do not work in waste collection. Despite the relatively low earnings from waste collection, *Thikadars* innovatively attract young couples from Bangladesh by also offering the females jobs as domestic workers. With dual income, migration becomes viable economically. Housing, water, and sanitation are often provided by the *thikadars*; frequently, this housing is in vacant public property, with migrants living in constant fear of eviction. *Thikadars* often send Bangladeshis who have jobs back to their villages to recruit more workers. Another tier of intermediaries involved in

the process are the human smugglers who help the migrants cross the border (Siddiqui, 2005). These intermediaries' role is solely to negotiate in favour of the irregular migrants with the security forces at the India and Bangladesh border in exchange for money; they have no further involvement in the migrants' journey.

4.2 Intermediaries operational at inter-regional migration

In both origin countries and inter-regional destinations, formal and informal intermediaries facilitate migration. Licensed recruiting agencies play a crucial role as major intermediaries operating across all South Asian countries. As per the immigration regulations of each country, these agencies are exclusively authorised to recruit workers for overseas employment. They are responsible for exploring employment opportunities, receiving clearance from respective government missions of their own countries in destination countries, obtaining permission to recruit workers based on pre-approved work visas, organise flights, and connect workers to respective employers.

Most of the recruitment agencies, however, are located in national or state capitals. They recruit workers through a huge network of informal sub-agents operating at the grassroots level, primarily in rural areas (ILO, 2022; 2018; IOM, 2019; Rajan et al., 2017). A study on the role of sub-agents in Bangladesh found that 17 important functions of labour recruitment are conducted by the sub-agents (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2019). They disseminate information on availability of visa/work permit at the local level; match the skills of the migrant workers to the skills required by Foreign Employers (FEs); inform migrants and their households about the terms and conditions of the available jobs; conduct primary recruitment and complete financial transactions; link migrants with training/skilling as per employment opportunities in destination countries; collect and transfer passports to the recruiting agencies; and accompany migrants on formal interviews with the recruiting agencies as well as with the government agencies during clearance processes, etc.

Social capital theory highlights the resources, actual or virtual, acquired by an individual or a group by virtue of being part of durable social networks that facilitate access to employment opportunities overseas or at the local level to a large group of individuals (Bourdieu and Wacqueant, 1992). In the case of recruitment of workers in all the South Asian countries, social networks primarily operate through relatives and friends who have migrated earlier. These connections would help obtain visas from their employers and later bring other family members, relatives, and neighbours through those visas to their country of destination. The cost of such migration was nominal, leading traditional social network theorists to argue that the migration costs would decline over the years due to the operation of social networks (Bourdieu and Wacqueant, 1992). However, for the last decade, visas obtained through social networks have also been sold to relatives and friends as well as on the open market (World Bank, 2022). Hence, in South Asia, the cost of migration for visas obtained through social networks has also become very high.

Most discussion on recruitment mainly highlights the procedures followed in the countries of origin. Nevertheless, at least half of the recruitment functions are conducted in the countries of destination. Since the 1950s, labour migration is managed in the Gulf states under the *kafala* system, with variations across individual countries. In this system, the request to bring any overseas workers must be placed before the concerned ministry by the employers, who are known as *Kafils* (sponsors). The *Kafil* system arrived from the *Beduin* principals of hospitality that set obligations in the treatment and protection of foreign guests (Khan and Harroff-Tavel, 2011). *Kafils* are supposed to assume full economic and legal responsibility for the employee during the contract period. Sponsors are responsible for paying any placement fees, the worker's air tickets, the commission to recruitment agencies if they use their services, and the costs of the medical tests.

As per the official procedure, Gulf and the other Arab labour-receiving countries make five-year projections of labour needs. Accordingly, the relevant ministry issues work permits to their recruiting agencies and outsourcing companies once they set their demand for foreign workers. These agencies recruit workers based on the number of allocated work permits, typically in the name of an individual recruiting agency or the employer who mostly originate from the concerned country of destination. Some recruiting agencies and outsourcing companies are also owned by nationals of other countries but have legal registration with the government to conduct recruitment business in a particular country of destination.

In practice, however, many distortions have occurred regarding the *Kafil's* responsibility to migrants as well as work permit issuance in different destinations. Recruiting agencies are encountering challenges in directly obtaining demand letters from employers. They are forced to collect a large number of visas from various tiers of visa traders operating in destination countries (Siddiqui, 2012), including recruiting agencies, outsourcing companies, and migrant workers acting as informal recruiters. These recruiting agencies and large-scale brokers in destination countries secure work visas by making a partial payment of the placement fees. Once the booking is made, based on the paper signed between the authorities and recruiting agents or placement agencies, the latter usually sells all the visas at a higher price to the next tier of intermediaries in the destination countries. The second tier of the intermediaries could be a local, a foreign national, or a South Asian. These intermediaries then resell those visas to the highest bidding recruiting agencies across South Asia. There is evidence of the existence of third and even fourth tiers of intermediaries purchasing visas from the market.

These intermediaries subsequently sell the visas to individual workers, i.e., relatives, neighbours, or friends of workers in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Nepal. Official data from Bangladesh shows that for decades, around 70 to 80 per cent of visas have been acquired by aspirant migrants from either their employers or local sub-agents. Among the South Asian countries, Bangladeshi workers pay the highest migration costs. In 2018-2019, in the Qatar-Bangladesh corridor, the cost of migration was USD 4,000 whereas it was USD 1,000 for a Nepali

migrant; in the Bangladesh-Malaysia corridor, the cost was USD 2,900 but in case of Nepal it was USD 690, and in Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia corridor the cost was USD 3,200 whereas for Nepal it was USD 760 (Bossavie and Wang, 2021; World Bank, 2022). The major costs include passport, training, recruiting agency fees, sub-agent fees, airfare, medical and emigration clearance fees, welfare fees, insurance, and payment of seed money. Despite the high costs, migrants would have been satisfied if they had received a decent job. However, 12 per cent of Bangladeshi migrants did not receive any job, and a further 11 per cent failed to receive the promised job.

This section shows that formal and informal intermediaries play a role in all types of population movement. Intermediaries range from licensed recruiting agencies to informal sub-agents and human smugglers. The role of private recruiting agencies is well regulated in all South Asian countries, and informal intermediaries are often seen as unwanted elements. By policy interventions, successive governments of these countries have attempted to abolish the system of informal intermediaries. However, some migration researchers demonstrated that informal intermediaries or sub-agents still play an important role in facilitating matches between employers and employees (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2019; Rafique and Rogaly, 2005).

5.0 Policies and Laws Affecting Migration

Most countries have a range of policies related to overseas migration, but none of the South Asian countries have developed a comprehensive policy on internal migration (Gill, 2003; Srivastava, 2012a; Srivastava, et al., 2014). In India, the central and state governments have taken some steps to extend entitlement benefits to internal migrants living in urban centres (Srivastava, 2012a, 2012b). However, there is no integrated policy framework that can solve the various problems faced by internal migrants. India is also the only country in South Asia with legislation, such as Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979, that applies to every establishment or contractor employing five or more inter-state migrant workers and provides for the regulation of recruitment and working conditions of migrant workers. The Indian government also has provisions for the education of migrant children under the Right to Education Act. To establish the rights of internal migrants, reduce vulnerability and address their needs in their new locations, it is important to have a policy.

A large volume of cross-border migration in South Asian countries is irregular. The national agencies in South Asian countries do not have proper estimates related to cross-border migration, which could range from informal border crossings to organised trafficking and smuggling of people (Wickramasekara, 2010). This lack of reliable data creates barriers for the development of effective cross-border immigration governance and policies, which often leads to reactive and fragmented migration governance approaches. It also complicates regional cooperation efforts to address migration-related challenges and safeguard migrant rights.

Historically, emigration from South Asian countries under British colonial rule was governed under the 1922 Emigration Order. This regulated the movement of labourers to other countries, particularly to British colonies, to ensure that the flow of migrant workers aligned with colonial interests. During the early 1980s, when short-term contract migration increased, most countries introduced new emigration laws. In India, the Emigration Act of 1983 regulates the emigration of Indian workers for overseas employment. The Act establishes the requirement of obtaining emigration clearance from the Office of Protector of Emigrants (POE, which is under the Ministry of External Affairs) for those holding Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports. In 2017, the law was revised, and clearance is now required only for 18 listed countries. The Act also mandates for recruitment agencies to be registered and lays out the rules for their registration, renewals, and suspension. It foresees penalties for recruitment agencies in the case of violations of its provisions and sets fee limits for migrants.

In Sri Lanka, SLBFE Act No. 21/1985, amended by Act No. 4 of 1994 and Act No. 56 of 2009, is the primary legislation dealing with foreign employment. In 2007, a separate Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment was established. The Government of Sri Lanka formulated the National Labour Migration Policy in October 2008 as well as a National Action Plan.

In Pakistan, the Emigration Ordinance 1979 and the Emigration Rules of 1979 regulate emigration, overseas employment, and recruiting agencies. Section 8 of the Emigration Ordinance manages the recruitment agencies and processes and protects workers' interests. The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment manages the migration of private-sector workers, while the Overseas Employment Corporation manages public-sector migration (Khatri, 2007). Pakistan introduced a National Emigration Policy in 2009.

In 2006, Bangladesh was the first South Asian country to introduce an Overseas Employment Policy, which it revised ten years later. In 2013, it revised the emigration ordinance 1982 and framed the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act. The Ministry of Expatriates, Welfare and Overseas Employment governs overseas employment, with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) as line agency. Bangladesh established additional institutions for overseas migration: the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Service Ltd. (BOESL), Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), and Expatriates' Welfare Bank. Nepal's Foreign Employment Act 2007 and Rules 2064 (2008) takes a rights-based approach to migration. It reduced some of the restrictions imposed earlier on female migration (Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012). The government of Nepal has also established a Labour Bank to provide subsidised loans to potential migrants and support reintegration of returned migrants. Reintegration loans are intended to be used for business development and should be repaid within five years (IOM, 2024).

None of the South Asian countries have any comprehensive policy on internal migration. India has some specific provisions to protect internal migrants. As British colonies, the South Asian countries discussed (except Nepal) regulated migration under British Rule 2022. Since the 1980s,

these countries have framed new emigration laws. Almost all countries had restrictions on female international migration for employment that were gradually eased.

6.0 The Challenges and Opportunities brought by Migration

In the global context, various studies have emerged that demonstrate migration represents an opportunity for societal transformations towards sustainable development. Evidence is replete showing how migration constitutes flows of ideas, remittances, and social capital that could potentially transform economic, social, cultural, and political life in both origin and destination areas (Castles, 1998; Black et al., 2011; de Haas et al. 2020). However, migration also creates negative social and economic outcomes, depending on the nature, context, and circumstances of migration. This section highlights the opportunities and challenges of migration in the context of South Asia.

6.1 Poorer people have more access to internal and less to inter-regional and inter-continental migration

Studies confirm that the majority of migrants who participate in internal, cross-border, inter-regional, or inter-continental migration often benefit economically from their movements (Ratha and Mohapatra, 2011; OECD, 2016). Studies also show that economic gains may come at the cost of other areas of wellbeing, while the cost of migration can in itself be a major hindrance, especially for poor people who want to move (World Bank, 2022). Other factors such as age and sex also influence who would migrate and who would not. For example, Siddiqui (2022b) shows that in the case of internal migration, mostly males migrate from the Chapainawabgonj district of Bangladesh because there is a pre-established network that helps male migrants join the construction sector in major urban locations. As a result, households that do not have adult men are not able to participate in that stream of migration. Therefore, one of the major challenges of adult women of Chapainawabgonj is the lack of access to networks that could link them with female labour markets. Docquier et al. (2010), Koechlin and Leon (2007), and Taylor et al. (2005) have shown that during the initial migration phase, international migration tends to be accessed more by those from relatively affluent backgrounds. However, policy interventions in countries of origin, the types of labour demanded in destination countries, the development of social networks by migrants, and access to loans for migration may make various types of international movement available to people with lower economic backgrounds too. However, members of poorer communities often take risky and irregular migration pathways to go abroad. Female domestic workers in the Gulf countries who migrate from South Asia are often from very poor backgrounds (Gamburd, 2000; Perera and Siddiqui, 2000; Raharto, 2011; Rahman and Lian, 2009; Siddiqui, 2001).

In the context of inter-continental migration from South Asia towards the developed countries, there are specific schemes for the migration of knowledge workers or highly skilled workers. In such context, the scope of regular migration for low-skilled workers is very limited. Consequently, this results in different types of irregular migration routes. Workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka attempt to migrate to different countries in Europe with the help of informal sub-agents. A significant number of these migrants die crossing the Mediterranean Sea or are detained by law enforcement agencies and returned to their countries of origin; others remain hostage to the human traffickers for extraction of ransom money from their left-behind families.

6.2 Poorer migrants enjoy very few rights at work

A significant proportion of migrants across various categories (internal, cross-border, inter-regional and diaspora) experience difficult work and living conditions in the countries of destination (Asis, 2006; Srivastava, 2005; Siddiqui and Abrar, 2019). Along with some common difficulties, vulnerabilities vary according to the type of migration. Internal migration is often associated with exploitative and inadequate living and working conditions across all the South Asian countries (Szaboova, 2019). In the case of short-term international contract migration, migrant workers often face major challenges due to opaque recruitment practices at both destination and origin countries. In explaining the migration system of Bangladesh and Malaysia, Bhuiyan shows that precarious recruitment practices often signal precarious job conditions leading to a precarious migration result. Precarity, as an emerging class, is characterised by insecurity across three crucial domains: labour, income, and rights.

Some of the major challenges in processing migration identified by Siddiqui and colleagues (2001; also RMMRU, 2016; Srivastava and Pandey, 2017; Siddiqui, 2012b) are visa trading in destination countries, layers of agents and sub-agents, the exorbitant costs of obtaining work permits/visas, fraudulent practices by local sub-agents, contract substitution, non-payment or irregular payment of wages, and lack of adherence to social protection in countries of destination. The South Asian short-term international contract migrants' temporary status often precludes access to social services in the host countries. Shah (2008) and Adhikari (2011) showed how Nepalese workers in Qatar experienced differences in work conditions and health coverage based on their educational background.

6.3 Health risks of poorer migrants are more acute

Srivastava (2005) notes that most of the poor internal migrants in India live in urban slums and unhygienic conditions that lead to health problems and a prevalence of diseases. Workers in India's quarries, construction sites, mines, tile factories, and brick kilns are also exposed to various health hazards such as lung disease, body aches, sunstroke, and skin irritation. The informal or temporary labour sectors in India, in which some internal female migrants are involved, do not provide for maternity leave; rather, women often have to resume work immediately after

childbirth, resulting in reproductive health problems (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). Hettiarachchi (2001), Perera (2004), and Siddhisena and Boyagoda (2007) have shown that migrants are often vulnerable to health risks at their destination where they may lack access to proper care. For example, female labour migration to the FreeTrade Zone (FTZ) in Sri Lanka has increased migrants' risk of sexually transmitted diseases and caused a rise in unwanted pregnancies.

6.4 Female migrants, including domestic workers, are often vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse

Internal and international female migrant workers working within the private sphere of their employer's home face significant risks of mistreatment and abuse but are typically excluded from labour laws in destination areas (Khan and Harroff-Tavel, 2011). In the case of short-term contract international migration, the passports of domestic workers are often confiscated and their movements beyond the household are restricted, particularly in the Gulf countries. This can also be the case for internal domestic workers. Some domestic workers are subjected to physical and sexual violence, affecting their physical and mental wellbeing (Indian Social Institute, 1993; Scaria, 2004).

6.5 Households' economic gains from migration is significant

A range of literature is available on the economic impacts of migration on South Asian migrants as well as their households and extended families. The Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS) and the World Bank(2009) showed that the monthly income of Nepalese migrants in Middle Eastern countries was 7.4 times higher than the average monthly income in Nepal. Similarly, internal migrants also earned 7.61 per cent more than those who do not migrate within Nepal as remittances are a valuable input to family income (Adhikari, 2011; Afsar, 2009; Billah, 2011; Guest, 2003: 11; ADB, OECD and ILO, 2023). In the four districts of Bangladesh, remittances by international contract migrants constituted 55 per cent of overall migrant household income (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2003); the IOM Household Remittance Survey of Bangladesh (2009) found that 20 per cent of migrant households saw a rise in their household income due to remittances (IOM, 2010). Migrants thus often serve as financial stabilisers for their households (Ponsot and Obegi, 2010). In the state of Kerala in India, for example, international migration has reduced the unemployment rate by 2.2percentage points (Zachariah and Rajan, 2009).

6.6 Migration reduces poverty at the family level

Reviewing data from 71 countries, Adams and Page (2005) established a broad correlation between international migration and poverty reduction. They estimated that a 10 per cent increase in official international remittances per capita would result in a 3.5 per cent decrease in the number of people living in poverty. A more recent panel survey of 6,100 households conducted across 20 districts of Bangladesh found a decline in the incidence of poverty from 10 per cent in 2017 to 6 per cent

in 2020 among households that took part in intra-regional short-term contract migration. In the case of internal migrant households, poverty dropped from 25 per cent to 11 per cent (Siddiqui, 2022b).

In Nepal, the dramatic increase in remittances was the main cause for a significant reduction in the headcount poverty rate from 42 per cent in 1995-1996 to 31 per cent in 2003-2004 (World Bank, 2006b). However, it's worth noting that migrant remittances may have negative impacts on communities of origin. In the case of Nepal, remittances are mainly invested in urban areas and thus migrant origin areas do not receive economic benefits from remittances other than to maintain subsistence (Adhikari, 2011, p. 10).

6.7 Role of migration in human capital formation is mixed

Various studies show that remittances from international migration are disproportionately spent on education and health rather than on everyday consumption (Adams, 2005; Adams et al., 2008; Nagarajan, 2009; Ratha et al. 2011; Valero-Gil, 2008; World Bank, 2006a). Evidence from rural Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh suggests that short term international migration is associated with increased school enrolment rates (Bhadra, 2007; Mansuri, 2006; SMC, 2004). The literature on *internal* migration in India, however, shows that the bulk of the remittances is spent to support the basic needs of families left behind, including expenses for food, education, healthcare, housing improvements, and sometimes small business investments (ILO, 2020). Srivastava and Rajashri (2010) highlighted that in India, children accompanying seasonal and circular internal migrants do not attend school as school systems generally do not allow children to be absent for prolonged periods. In Sri Lanka, internal migrants who live in slum areas face problems accessing schools for their children (Fernando, 2005, p. 692; Hugo, 2002). In the case of short-term international migration, Battistella and Conaco (1998) argue that the education of migrants' children suffers in the absence of parents who have migrated abroad.

6.8 Remittances increase financial flow to the national economy

In recent years, global remittance flows have increased significantly. Official statistics show that in 2023, migrants from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) sent USD656 billion in remittances to their origin countries (World Bank and KNOMAD, 2024) – a figure three times the amount of official development assistance to these countries. The World Bank estimates that remittances are at least 25 to 50 per cent more than received through formal channels (Chandra, 2022). Remittances play a crucial role in maintaining a positive balance of payments and served as a resilient source of capital for many developing countries during the global financial crisis in 2008-2009 (Ratha et al., 2012). Remittance flows remained strong for South Asian countries during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ratha, 2023).

This section highlighted how migration has played a positive role in respect to poverty alleviation and human development of household members. Migration also contributes to investment in different income-generating avenues of household members. Nonetheless, all types of migration from South Asia present significant challenges. Of course, the nature of challenges varies

according to the type of migration as well as the policies of origin and destination countries. At the same time, migration also opens up opportunities for economic and social transformation.

7.0 Summary, Conclusions and Future Research Areas

7.1 Summary and conclusions

South Asia is a major migration hub: 15 per cent of global migration originates from South Asia. Within the region, various forms of migration – regular and irregular as well as within and beyond borders – take place. Short-term contract migration within the region has been the most researched area, while research on diasporas is only available in respect to India. This paper shows migration's complexities, with both commonalities as well as differences among South Asian countries. In the case of internal migration, for Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, major flows are rural-to-urban; in India and Nepal, major flows are rural-to-rural. Except for Sri Lanka, principal migrants from other countries are mostly males. Gender dynamics influence migration, with patriarchal norms shaping the participation of females, who migrate predominantly due to marriage. Nonetheless, female migration for employment is on the rise. South Asian governments still impose restrictions on migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women, justifying this as under the purview of protection.

Furthermore, most South Asian countries have a long history of hosting refugees from neighbouring countries. Among the South Asian countries, India and Nepal have a more liberal regime for cross-border movement due to the 1950 friendship treaty. In other countries, stricter migration regimes exist, often impeding cross-border movements for labour and resulting in irregular migration.

South Asia is the major receiver of remittances from all types of migrants – diaspora, regional short-term contract migrants, and internal migrants. However, data on the remittance flow of internal migrants is not available for all countries. Remittances are also sent through informal channels, such as *hundi* or hand-carry. It is estimated that the true total of remittances is 25 to 50 per cent higher than received through formal channels (Chandra, 2022). All South Asian countries have initiated policies and laws to govern short-term contract migration to the Gulf and other Arab, South East, and East Asian countries. India framed its diaspora policy and internal migrant protection program in 2001; however, the other South Asian countries have yet to develop and implement similar laws and policies to ensure the rights of internal migrants and diaspora.

7.2 Future research areas

To enhance the positive outcome of all types of migration and address challenges, it is important that all aspects of migration, ranging from drivers to consequences of migration, are studied

thoroughly. So far, there is hardly any research that examines all types of migration under one framework. The studies available concentrate on one type of migration, for instance, internal, cross-border, regional, or inter-continental. There is a need to view the migration system of individual countries holistically. It is important to decompartmentalise different migration streams and study all types of movement under one umbrella to understand a particular country's migration system. It will also allow one to comprehend the contribution of migration to wider socio-economic and political transformation.

MEMO project has chosen one component of migration research. That is understanding the drivers of all types of migration – internal, cross-border, intra-regional, and inter-continental – under one framework. One of the major objectives of our study will be to map the links between internal, intra-regional, and inter-continental migration along complex corridors of migration flows. The specific objectives of the research are to understand how social, economic, political, and environmental drivers of migration interact and shape migration. Does the internal migration flow contribute to future cross-border, intra-regional, or inter-continental migration flows? It will be pertinent to reflect on the role of governance actors and institutions, both formal and informal, in origin and destination countries in shaping different migration streams. It is equally important to excavate the common dynamics within a migration system or across systems that would help us develop a comprehensive analytical model. The next step of our inquiry is to design a program that uses the scientific knowledge generated by our study to enhance the capacity of those local and national actors involved in upholding the rights of migrants while assisting them.

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