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Human Mobility and Reverse Migration in Asia: Triggers and Travails

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Human mobility is an inherent feature of all societies, triggered by several factors that co-exist with diverse conditions determining the choice of people regarding the destination and travel. The principal drivers of mobility include livelihood issues, global or regional employment opportunities, origin/host country's socio-economic conditions, conflict and instability, governance and environmental challenges, etc. Human mobility is driven by greater connectivity within and beyond regions. Migrants bring with their labour, skills and service, trading networks, and a business spirit to the destination countries. However, there is a growing concern today that the sustainability of opportunities in the migratory spaces is contingent upon an array of conditions that remain uncertain. Reverse migration is indeed a consequence of this scenario. It informs a situation where migrants return to their home country either by their own choice or under the pressures of the host country's domestic and regional setting. How policymakers deal with the mobility drivers—at the national, regional, and international levels—and the extent to which they comprehend enabling/disabling environs, as well as the conditions of migrants, influence their migration management and governance. This article delves into the challenges to human mobility in the context of reverse migration in Asia triggered by regional and international circumstances—from the Gulf War (1990), the global financial crisis (2008) to the Arab Spring (2011) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). The article also brings out the scenario of reverse migration in Asia, in general, and South and Southeast Asia, in particular.

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During the last two centuries, human mobility within Asia and across the world witnessed an unprecedented surge, which is much higher than at any other time in human history. In many regions in Asia, migration has been a proliferating social dynamic with different trajectories and travails of human mobility. The inter-regional or cross-national connectivity that human communities brought in through migration "were both cause and consequence of the expansion of states and markets, the spread of the printing press, and the growth of modern military" (Amrith, 2011, p.2).

The history of migration in modern Asia can be understood in terms of significant shifts and turns in human mobility since the middle of the nineteenth century. Colonialism in Asia played a major role in human mobility when indentured labour from countries such as India was crucial for the metropolitan capital. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the First World War, indentured labour was recruited to work on the British sugar, cotton, and tea plantations (as well as rail construction projects) in colonies in West Indies, Africa, and South and Southeast

Asia. During this period, the colonial office had taken as many as 2 million Indian indentured workers to several colonies including Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, and Guyana. The travails of these migrants were recorded in many studies (see Emmer, 1986). Thus, different forms of migration in modern Asia can be seen in the period until the onset of the Economic Depression of the 1930s. However, the inter-war period disrupted human mobility due to Economic Depression, broken markets, and war clouds hovering over Europe. The Second World War further broke the migration links and opportunities in Asia. The second phase of Asian migration began in the post- war conditions, particularly with the decolonisation process in Asia. The rise of new states in Asia, however, did not result in large-scale migration due to new regulations in place in regard to entry/exit and passport/visa regimes. On the other hand, these states witnessed significant human mobility within their national boundaries demanded by post-colonial development dynamics. The third phase in modern Asian migration began in the 1970s with the rapid economic transformation, within the regions of West Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. While the West Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region opened up vast opportunities for international migration—with the surge in oil economies—East Asia provided a new spectrum of development with the global economic centre being shifted to the East.

The Asian migration in this phase witnessed large-scale human mobility from South and Southeast Asia to the countries in the Persian Gulf as well as to Malaysia, Singapore, etc. While there was a surge in labour migration from South India (Kerala), Pakistan and Bangladesh to the GCC countries, the domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia were indispensable for the countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Parallel to the 'oil boom' in the Gulf, there was a rapid pace of industrialisation in East Asia, in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. In fact, the driver of the 'East Asian miracle' was the dramatic growth of the eight countries in East Asia—Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Even as the high-performing Asian countries sought to stabilise their economies with relatively sound development policies, it inevitably led to the rise of a skilled labour force, and human mobility played a major role in the making of this 'East Asian miracle' (Stiglitz, 1996; Birdsall, Ross & Sabot 1995). It may be noted that a significant part of labour mobility was related to the "intraregional movement of less skilled workers from poorer East Asian economies to the middle income, industrialising nations in the region" (Manning, 2001). However, the East Asian countries began to face a major financial crisis in 1997 in the wake of capital flight, a fall in the rate of growth and investment, and macroeconomic volatility. According to Manning (2001), the crisis manifested badly in five countries, and the issues included "the extent to which less secure (and often clandestine) migrant workers were first to feel the brunt of the crisis, replacement of migrants by local workers and tensions arising out of countervailing pressures for increased migration from those labour exporting countries worst hit by the crisis, such as Indonesia." Knowles, Pernia & Racelis(1999) noted that foreign migrants working in other Asian countries were badly affected by the crisis. In Korea, for instance, the number of registered overseas workers fell by 16.4 per cent during the period. Nearly one million migrant workers lost their jobs in Malaysia, and 2,70,150 migrant workers were repatriated in 1998. Unlike the countries within Southeast Asia, South Asia apparently did not experience large- scale reverse migration though it was the second main source region and accounted for about 9 per cent of the total stock of migrants in this region. Among the countries of South Asia, India topped the list of migrant sending countries in Southeast Asia. In the post-crisis years, there was an estimated 1,665,000 Indians living in Malaysia, 307,000 in Singapore, and 85,000 in Thailand (India, 2001; Chanda, 2012). Though the East Asian financial crisis did not seem to have a direct impact on the South Asian diaspora in the region, the global financial meltdown after a decade in the Global North set in motion contagion effects in several migratory spaces.

Implications of Global Financial Crisis

The global financial crisis that began in the United States in 2008 and spread to many regions such as Europe, caused multiple disruptions in financial markets, development activities, and labour markets across the world. It expectedly affected international migration and human mobility in several ways. The crisis continued to affect the global economy, causing an economic slowdown, layoffs, loss of jobs, and increasing poverty. Millions of migrant workers were reported to have lost their livelihood options. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recorded that global unemployment grew from 18 million (2007) to 30 million (2009), and with the continuing recession, there would be nearly 50 million workers without jobs all over the world (ILO, 2009). However, the global financial crisis did not affect China, the biggest populous country, and its economy remained relatively strong, providing new openings at home for the Chinese overseas who returned. Moreover, the Chinese government launched new programmes for attracting talent from its diaspora, and the returnees were provided with several incentives to work in the country's national development (Wang, 2013). It may be noted that there were more than 46 million Chinese overseas living across the world. There are two broad categories of Chinese migrants—those who work on labour projects and those who develop trade and commercial businesses. Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore host the largest segment of the Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia. For the South Asian countries, the migration scenario in the West Asia- GCC region was a worrying concern because of the huge size of their expatriate base, which largely exceeded the natives of the GCC countries. The oil-rich countries have a relatively small population, but their revenues from oil exports accelerated the pace of economic activities, particularly after 1973. The GCC countries naturally became dependent on overseas labour, and during 1973- 1980, the volume of expatriate labour grew considerably. In less than a decade since then, workers from South Asia have played a significant role in infrastructure development and construction in the GCC countries.

However, a major setback came during the Gulf War (1990), which pushed millions of migrant labourers to return home, causing distressing conditions in sending countries. In the months following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, nearly 2 million expatriate workers had to return to their home countries. This included nearly 7.5 lakh Yemenis, half a million Egyptians, and 6 lakh Asians. Though the majority of them were unskilled workers, there were also professionals and skilled labourers. In some cases, workers were not even permitted to return home insofar as they were indispensable to their economy. Many others were stranded in war zones, such as Sri Lankan housemaids and Indian workers, because they did not have money and means to escape from the region. There were also instances when the expatriate workers' bank accounts were frozen, besides loss of property, pending wages and other benefits.

In many West Asian countries, such as Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, etc., unemployment increased considerably. The Gulf War also led to the massive repatriation of workers. In August-October 1990, more than 1.76 lakh Indian expatriates were rescued and repatriated to India—the largest ever air evacuation mission that India had undertaken (Fabian, 2012, pp.93-107).

In the years after the Gulf War, though there were opportunities for foreign labour in the post-war reconstruction activities, the policies adopted by the GCC states—often referred to as 'Gulfisation'—became a new challenge to migration. During this period, the Gulf regimes started engaging more of their nationalities, and the global financial crisis only added momentum to this process amid growing unemployment in many Arab countries. On the eve of the global financial crisis, three GCC countries had the highest share of international migrants—Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. The sectors severely affected by the crisis were financial services, construction, manufacturing, travel, etc. Industries such as mining, steel, ore, and food processing were badly affected (Salman, 2013, pp.41-62). There were migrants in all these sectors, and the nature of their jobs varied from skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled to professional jobs. In all GCC countries, there was, however, a construction boom since the beginning of the new century, with high oil prices and enormous investor confidence. It was reported that with the onslaught of the financial crisis, nearly 30,000 construction workers lost their jobs in 2009. This resulted in the fall of the real estate and construction sector, particularly in places like Dubai, where both high and low skilled workforces suffered job losses. The impact of the crisis was also manifest in the travel and hospitality industry. Thousands of migrant workers were served notices to find alternative employment or leave the country. As much as 45 per cent of the construction- related expatriate workforce faced layoffs in 2009, which included managerial positions also (Salman, 2013; Rajan & Narayana, 2010; Abraham & Rajan, 2011).

Following the financial crisis, some of the GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and UAE, began to put restrictions on migrant entry. This was justified from the point of view of protecting their nationals from losing their jobs in a scenario of growing unemployment. Kuwait, for instance, brought in legislation in 2008 raising the mandatory quota for national labour in the private sector. UAE issued a decree in 2009 with a view to protecting Emirati nationals in the private sector. There were statements from Saudi officials also, denounced engaging overseas workers in certain sectors.

The adverse impact of the financial crisis on the GCC countries triggered reverse migration, and this was more evident in the case of South Asian migrants who constituted a significant force in the region. A migration survey conducted by the Centre for Development Studies during this period sought to record the experiences of the return migrants in South Asia, in general, and Kerala, in particular. This study estimated the number of migrants who lost jobs in the GCC countries, as well as the number of workforces who remained there without returning to their homes. According to this study, the number of return migrants from the GCC countries to South Asia during the crisis period was 2,63,660. The number of return migrants to India in 2009 was 1,40,526, with Kerala registering a record number of 61,036. The number of Indian expatriates in UAE alone was 1.7 million at that time, and it was reported that the number of return migrants from UAE would be as high as 47, 000 (Rajan & Narayana 2010).

TABLE 1: The Estimates of Reverse Migration in South Asia from GCC, 2009

Country/State	*Stock of Migrants*	*Return Migrants due to crisis*
South Asia	9,475,000	2,63,660
India	5,050,000	140,526
Pakistan	2,3000,00	64,002
Bangladesh	900,000	25,044
Nepal	250,000	6,957
Sri Lanka	975,000	27,131
Kerala (India)	2,193,412	61,036

Source: Rajan and Narayana (2010).

The study further estimated the number of migrants who lost jobs in GCC countries but did not return in search of alternative employment opportunities (even at lower wages). According to estimates, out of 2.2 million expatriates from Kerala, about 39,396 persons lost their jobs during 2008-2009 but did not return to their homes (Zacharia & Rajan, 2010; Rajan & Narayana, 2010). The estimates made of the larger South Asian scenario are given below.

TABLE 2: The Estimates of Migrants who lost jobs in GCC but have not returned, 2009

Country/State	*Stock of Migrants*	*Migrants who did not return*
South Asia	9,475,000	170,181
India	5,050,000	90,703
Pakistan	2,3000,00	41310
Bangladesh	900,000	16165
Nepal	250,000	4490
Sri Lanka	975,000	17512
Kerala (India)	2,193,412	39,396

Source: Rajan and Narayana (2010).

Rajan and Narayana (2010) underlined the fact that the South Asian expatriates who lost jobs remained reluctant to return due to two reasons— (1) the expenses incurred for the migration and (2) the nature of the channels of migration. According to them, the high cost of migration to the Gulf caused many emigrants to borrow from various financial sources. Under such conditions, even if the expatriates lost their jobs in the Gulf, they would prefer not to return home fearing the inability to repay the debt already contracted there. They would rather accept any job at a lower wage and send home remittances to repay their loans even during a crisis in the destination country.

Another characteristic of South Asian migration to the Gulf is the part played by the social network, which consists of friends and relatives, who perform a major role in the channel of migration flows by arranging visas and other requirements for the emigration process (Rajan & Narayana, 2010). An ILO-commissioned study showed that nearly 80 per cent of Indian migrants relied on their relatives and friends as major channels for migration. This indeed ensured a sense of support even as job losses caused hardship. The study further noted that in spite of the reversals in the period 2008-09, remittances did not fall in South Asia, as feared, due to 1) the appreciation of the US dollar vis-à-vis South Asian currencies; 2) the persisting oil price hike in the Gulf; 3) large scale reverse migration did not happen as predicted and 4) many who lost jobs did not want to return due to the debts incurred for migration (Rajan & Narayana, 2010).

Another study related to the return of South Asian migrants following the global financial crisis, addressed the question of integration into the home country's labour markets. It says that the labour markets in these home countries were "characterised by surplus labour supply conditions, weak labour demand conditions, and hence low wage rates" (Abraham & Rajan, 2011). Hence, the return migrants' ability to find employment of their choice may be limited. The study attributes many reasons for this. The sectors that these overseas migrants worked in their host country might not be available, or they were underdeveloped in the home country. The labour force itself could be over- skilled for the firms in the GCC, and therefore they need not necessarily get the job of their choice with the given expertise. The study further noted that the migrants who were willing to work in relatively poor conditions in the host environs might not be doing it in similar conditions in the home country because of the social stigma attached to such jobs. The study concluded that the job status of the return migrants was worse off than in their host country with a high share of casualisation, self-employment and unemployment in the crisis year, while formal regular employment share declined drastically; their average monthly earnings declined by average 46 per cent and got employment in industries with poor employment conditions (Abraham & Rajan, 2011). However, the life world of migrants in the GCC countries was further affected by the unprecedented turn of events in the Arab world which witnessed mass uprisings and changes of regimes in many countries. The situation was further compounded by the economic slowdown with the fall of oil prices.

The Arab Spring and Migration

The Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to many other countries in West Asia and North Africa—collectively called the 'Arab Spring'—impacted human mobility and migration in Asia in several ways. A major reason for the uprisings in the Arab world—in countries from Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya to Syria, Yemen and Bahrain—was the socio-political alienation of the people from the ruling dispensations (Seethi, 2019). In fact, an array of socioeconomic issues affecting Arab societies led to the outbreak of mass protests and movements (Fabian, 2022; Seethi, 2019). While each country had specific reasons emerging from its domestic political situation, there was a common thread, as observed by Talmiz Ahmad, former Indian Ambassador to the GCC countries, that pertains to the call for "freedom, democracy and personal dignity" and the "common slogans were based around bread, freedom and social justice" (Ahmad, 2022, p.322). With prices continuing to rise in the Arab countries, over 50 per cent of the people were living below the poverty line and spending more than half of their income on basic food. Ahmad noted that a "combination of demographic challenges that had engendered unemployment, the food crisis, and rising poverty, coupled with the rulers' resort to coercive force in several cases, led to a pervasive dissatisfaction..." (Ahmad, 2022, p.321).

While the Arab uprising had its domestic dimensions and regional implications, its overall impact on human mobility and migration deserved serious attention. While the expatriate base of the GCC countries was huge, the share of South Asia (and India in particular) was quite significant as the major source of the overseas labour force. As Ranjan Mathai, former foreign secretary of India, said, India being in the 'heartland of Asia' with millions of its citizens in the Gulf, "the issues unfolding in West Asia were of critical importance on their daily lives" (Mathai, 2019, pp.21-22). The following figures show the volume of the expatriate population in the GCC region.

TABLE 3: Migration Stock in the GCC region - country of origin, 2000-2013

Country/State	*2000*	*2010*	*2013*
South Asia	59,18832	1,23,21492	1,32,76229
India	31,52719	63,34374	68,28957
Pakistan	13,88615	27,07694	29,15556
Bangladesh	1147461	2922335	3147251
Nepal	17459	27939	30057
Sri Lanka	196127	302826	326088
Total number of migrants in GCC countries	1,05,49781	2,07,58167	2,23,57811

Source: UNDESA (2013).

While the Arab uprising did not directly impact the GCC countries, the waves of discontent reached some countries, such as Oman and Bahrain (Louër 2015; Worrall, 2012). Plausibly, the overseas labour force in all GCC economies became a focal point of popular grievances. In Oman, overseas migrants were blamed by protestors, who charged them with supporting corrupt local administration and commercial elites to manipulate the wage structure. Though Saudi Arabia did not witness anti-immigrant rage, demonstrators argued that the surge in unemployment, low salaries and decline in living standards were the manifestations of rising inequalities in the society. There were, however, voices of discontent in the country (Seethi, 2019). Evidently, all this prompted the Gulf regimes to resuscitate the erstwhile policies of labour nationalisation (often referred to as Saudization, Qatarisation, Omanisation, Kuwaitization, Bahrainisation, Emiratisation etc.) and put in place measures to boost nationals' employment. The GCC countries also applied pressures on commercial establishments (largely in the private sector) to regulate their overseas expatriate workforce.

There was another compelling factor that drastically affected the migration scenario of GCC countries—the oil price fall—which followed the Arab Spring and global recession. Though there was already a fall during 2008-09, the prices soon picked up. But in 2014, there was a sudden fall, and by 2016, crude oil prices had fallen by over 70 per cent. This obviously affected economic growth in many GCC countries and made it imperative to cut spending and investment (Seethi, 2016).

Insofar as Bahrain and Oman had much lower overseas reserves, they had a difficult time compared to other oil-rich countries which had substantial overseas reserves. Bahrain's case was too evident with its debt mounting to a level beyond 40 per cent of the GDP (*The Gulf News*, 2015). Faced with a series of reversals, virtually all GCC states were under pressure to introduce austerity measures which included new tax measures, cutting subsidies and public spending. Parallel to this, all GCC countries started measures to tighten control over the overseas workforce.

Saudi Arabia, for example, initiated a policy regime called *Nitaqat* (ranges) in September 2011. This was quite different from previous policies fixing quotas of labour force nationalisation. The new Saudi *Nitaqat* policy classified various nationalisation segments based on the size and the economic activity of firms. *Nitaqat* also devised and applied a system of rewards/sanctions for compliant/ non-compliant firms (Hussain, 2014). Many countries conveyed their concerns to Saudi Arabia over possible job losses to a large number of migrants in the country due to its new labour law. Saudi Arabia had more than 9 million overseas expatriates at that time whose remittances were quite significant for countries like India, Yemen, Pakistan and the Philippines. There were reports in 2013 that as many as 200,000 overseas workers were deported from the country over the past few months as part of labour market reforms aimed at putting more Saudi nationals into private sector jobs, where they made up only a tenth of the workforce (*The Economic Times,* 2013). Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia also feared massive job losses. It was estimated that under the *Nitaqat* scheme, nearly 30 per cent of the 1.2 million Filipinos in Saudi Arabia (around 360,000) would be affected (ILO, AP Migration, 2011).

Saudi Arabia's Vision-2030 agenda also caused alarm among the repatriates. It basically aimed at widespread reforms in vital sectors of the economy, including telecom, which was expected to implement 50 per cent Saudization by June 2016 (Seethi, 2016). There were reports at this time of the dismissal of 77,000 overseas workers in a Saudi company which employed nearly 40 per cent of the workers from India (*Khaleej Times*, 2016). In April 2017 there was another report that the Saudi labour ministry barred overseas migrants from working in the country's several shopping malls. The Saudi government was also reported to have plans to impose an ex-pat levy on employers, which would encourage employers to employ more nationals than overseas workers. It was feared the new measures would limit opportunities for the South and Southeast Asian labour force in Saudi Arabia, besides affecting their savings—an expat levy was expected to come when the country was also going to impose a 5 per cent value-added tax (*The Economic Times*, 2017).

In January 2018, the Government of India informed parliament that it had 'no information' to suggest that there were "any widespread job losses due to the Nitaqat programme. Relying on the figures provided by the Saudi Government, India's Ministry of External Affairs reported that the Indian community in the Kingdom had 'increased from 3 million in February 2017 to 3.25 million in September 2017. The job losses that occurred last year were mainly due to some companies facing economic problems, and losses are not attributable to Nitaqat' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). However, the impact of the Arab Spring and global recession on the migrants in Saudi Arabia was clear enough. It was estimated in a study that by July 2013, Saudi Arabia regularised 4 million overseas workers of which 1.4 million were Indians—nearly '4,36,667 transferred their services from non-Nitaqat-compliant business units to compliant units; 4,81,233 changed their profession; 4,70,000 renewed their iqama (job permit), and 1,41,301 Indians took advantage of the grace period the Nitaqat policy offered and returned to India" (Sasikumar & Thimothy, 2015).

According to an ILO commissioned study, the Government of India took measures to 'facilitate and reintegrate migrant workers returning due to unexpected events at the destination...' This included 'measures providing emergency certificates that enabled affected Indian workers to return to India and introduced special reintegration packages.' The study also pointed out that the steps taken by Kerala—the state that shared the largest number of migrants in the GCC region—were intended to integrate the returned migrants, beginning with creating a database of returnees and offering loans at subsidised rates to set up business ventures(Sasikumar & Thimothy, 2015). However, the limitations of such measures were evident from the ground-level realities. This researcher tried to corroborate the claims made by various agencies through a series of interviews with a cross-section of returnees in Kerala. The investigation found that many returnees were disappointed with the 'offers and promises' of the government at different levels.

Meanwhile, there were similar stories from other GCC countries. Qatar started austerity measures at this time in the name of overspending, overstaffing and lack of accountability. The Qatari government called for public-funded companies to downsize their programmes, which had its natural impact increasingly felt among the expatriates in the country. Qatar Petroleum (QP), for example, laid off thousands of expatriate employees during this time. Similarly, Oman introduced various policy measures aimed at substituting overseas workers with the country's nationals. This was also in the background of Omani protests in places like Sohar in 2011, inspired by the movements in Tunisia and Egypt against growing unemployment, high cost of living and corruption among ruling officials. While the unrest was put down, the government introduced some limited reforms favouring the nationals. Omanization was underway for a long, but there was a fall in the drive in the private sector from 18.8 per cent in 2005 to 12.2 per cent in August 2012. Apparently, the preferred option for employment for Omani nationals was the public sector, where the expatriates began to face retrenchment. The government also began to fix quotas for companies to ensure the percentage of Omani nationals vis-à-vis overseas workers. Green cards were issued for such companies reaching the mandated goal of downsizing labour (*Gulf News*, 2015).

In Kuwait, there was so much pressure to slash the number of overseas workers. So, the government-initiated Kuwaitization drive was part of the push to recruit more of its nationals. In 2017 the Civil Service Commission resolved to cut the number of expatriates in government establishments to be completed in five years. It was reported that nearly half of Kuwaitis were unemployed, and many were reluctant to join the private sector for want of a public sector job because of better benefits, perks, fewer working hours and job security (*Gulf News*, 2021). Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti legislators called on the government to slash the number of foreign workers by half and put a stop to what they referred to as "their onslaught on public services." A member of parliament, Khalid Al-Saleh, went to the extent of calling for the deportation of 50 per cent of the 3.3 million overseas workers living in the country (*Arab News*, 2019).

In Bahrain also, there was pressure on the government to slash the number of migrants. Bahrainisation law mandated that the companies which failed to comply with the regulations would be fined or their work permits revoked. The law stipulated that in every firm a Bahraini should be employed for every four overseas workers. The Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) clarified that the new measures were put in place following several companies allegedly misusing the law by keeping Bahrainis on payroll to secure work permits for foreigners and firing them afterwards (*Arabian Business*, 2016).

In the post-Arab Spring period, though there were measures underway to curb the expatriates in the GCC countries and there were reports of job losses for the Asian labour force, many such countries of origin (in regions such as South Asia) did not maintain proper data regarding reverse migration. On the other hand, the statistics of international agencies like the UNDESA and ILO indicate that there was not much reduction in the size of the total migrants from these countries. This might be due to the change in the structure of labour conditions with new avenues of jobs from new migrants or new opportunities that emerged in the host countries for the retrenched labour force. However, the UNDESA (2017a, b, c) says that four South Asian countries still featured in the world's top 20 countries of origin of international migrants in 2017, including India (first), Bangladesh (fifth), Pakistan (seventh) and Afghanistan (eleventh).

Collectively, there were over 38 million South Asian nationals living outside of their countries of origin in 2017 – both in other South Asian countries and farther afield (UNDESA, 2017a, b, c). In fact, above 76 per cent of all South Asian nationals living outside of their respective countries in 2017 were living in countries outside of the region, particularly in West Asia-GCC countries, Western Europe, North America and Southeast Asia (UNDESA, 2017a, b. c). In 2017, 44.3 per cent of South Asian citizens abroad were living in the West Asia- GCC region, while another 10.8 per cent were living in North America and 8.9 per cent were in Europe. Southeast Asia was the destination of a smaller yet notable population of South Asian migrants (UNDESA, 2017a, b, c).

TABLE 4: The stock of South Asian migrants living abroad, 1990-2017 (million)

Year	*Stock of migrants*
1990	23.9
1995	21.5
2000	23.4
2005	25.5
2010	33
2015	36.9
2017	38.4

Source: UNDESA (2017a)

ILO noted that migrants returning from abroad may bring with them new knowledge, experiences and skills that, given successful economic and social reintegration, carry the possibility of new opportunities for diversifying and transforming labour markets in South Asia (ILO, 2018). In fact, there was no evidence of this, ever recorded in any of these countries with significant results. However, ILO acknowledged that along with the benefits that emerged with labour migration from South Asia, there were several policy and governance challenges that arose, particularly concerning the protection of migrants. A study noted that low-skilled South Asian migrants faced many challenges associated with “malpractices in the recruitment process; job contracts and work specifications; working and living conditions abroad; and social security for migrants and returnees.” Migrant workers in irregular conditions also endured numerous challenges and vulnerabilities (ILO, 2018).

Challenges to Human Mobility under Global Pandemic

The global pandemic (COVID-19) that broke out in the Wuhan province in China in late 2019 and spread to all regions and countries across the world in 2020-21 became one of the most disastrous human security challenges in the last one century. The pandemic affected all activities in the world, and the people living in both the Global North and Global South bore the brunt of its health and socio-economic consequences. The UN estimated that the pandemic resulted in “reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and extreme poverty” (Seethi, 2021). The number of people in persistent poverty was predicted to rise amid the global health crisis. The most disastrous consequence of the pandemic was in the realm of human mobility. Migrants across the world were exposed to myriad forms of health insecurity (from quarantine, social distancing, frequent testing and surveillance, to post COVID complications) accompanied by the severe economic crisis, market collapse, stringent measures on mobility, job losses, wage theft, etc. Health emergencies also caused an additional burden on migrant workers’ living conditions which disrupted return and repatriation amid the continued global spread.

Lockdowns and border closures continued to affect labour mobility from the top origin countries in Asia. Remittances to these countries also fell during this time. There were severe strains on Asian migrants’ employment opportunities, and the pandemic only worsened the situation due to the health conditions in both their workplaces and residential places. Loss of income and unexpected repatriation further complicated their life world. Already the global recession reduced demands for overseas labour migrants in 2020-21. Disruptions in mobility also posed policy challenges in both origin and host countries in terms of arranging repatriation, travel and rehabilitation. According to ILO estimates, the labour migration from many Asian countries in 2020 fell by 44 per cent to 2.7 million workers (ILO, 2022). Migration trends in respect of the West Asia-GCC region, South Asia and Southeast Asia showed a sharp decline. The Philippines experienced the worst scenario. The number of overseas migrants in the country was 78 per cent lower than in 2019. Migration from India also fell by 74 per cent—there were only 94,000 migrants in 2020 compared to 3,68,000 in 2019. There was also a major decline in the migrant outflow from Sri Lanka (-72 %), Bangladesh (-69%), and Indonesia (-59%) (ILO, 2022).

West Asia-GCC region witnessed a sharp decline in the expatriate population in 2020. In fact, the declining trend was already visible in 2018, but after a slight improvement in 2019 (mainly due to fresh recruitments in Saudi Arabia), the dipping rate continued. Yet, Saudi Arabia was the main destination of labour migration from countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and India though the total number of migrants from these countries was less than half of the 2019 figures. UAE did not issue work permits for several months in 2020, and hence there was a drop of 30 per cent compared to the previous year. Bahrain and Qatar also witnessed a decline in the expatriate flow in 2020. In the wake of nationalisation policies underway in GCC countries, there was already a drop in the flow of overseas labour, and the pandemic further worsened the situation. Among the South Asian countries, the case of Sri Lanka is illustrative of the changing migration scenario. Nearly 82 per cent of migration from Sri Lanka was to the GCC region, but with the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a sharp fall of 74 per cent in 2020. Another migration destination of Asian labour is Southeast Asia, where countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia experienced a reverse trend since 2020.

Reverse Migration and Repatriation

There are several difficulties in the estimation of reverse migration. This is quite visible in the case of return and reintegration to Asian countries. Even innormal times, many countries have poor mechanisms for monitoring human mobility and the pattern of reverse migration. While migration to destination countries has the normal mandatory practice of registration and documentation, reverse migration seldom runs through the same procedures. Migrant-sending countries generally evade keeping records on the status of return migration, whether it happens voluntarily or forced or on the expiry of contracts. There are also problems with figures as data provided by some countries are based on misguided assumptions on return. There were also cases of missing numbers, such as when migrants return via land borders or seas (as it was more evident in South and Southeast Asia) which escape the notice of agencies engaged in aggregating data on human mobility. Even an analysis of the causes of reverse migration may be misleading. For example, an ILO study on the impact of COVID-19 on ASEAN migrant labour found that 27 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men reported the reason for their return to their home at the end of the contract. Another survey found that 14 per cent of Filipino migrant workers were set to return to their homes during this time, which had nothing to do with the pandemic outbreak (Wickramasekara, 2022; IOM, 2021). During the pandemic, foreign ministries of the countries in Asia played a major role in the repatriation. India and the Philippines remained on the top, and they undertook massive repatriation operations, particularly from the GCC countries. The Philippines deployed more than a hundred chartered flights for repatriating its 7,28,831 nationals from West Asia-GCC countries. India undertook one of the massive repatriation operations through its Vande Bharat Mission (VBM). Beginning in May 2020 and coordinated by the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Civil Aviation, and state governments, VBM sought to ensure the safe and secure repatriation of Indians from different countries. By October 2021, the VBM completed the repatriation of over 9.6 million Indian citizens (ILO, 2022). Nearly 4 million Indians have repatriated in the first phase itself, and 72 per cent of the repatriation was from the GCC countries. The Union Government informed Parliament that the VBM helped repatriate 9,562,570 persons by October 2021 (ILO, 2022). However, this did not include repatriation by land and sea, and the total number, then, may go over 10 million. The highest number of repatriated persons in India was recorded in Delhi (2.8 million) followed by Kerala (2.4 million) and Maharashtra (1 million). The estimates of government sources showed that 7.16 lakh workers returned to India from the GCC countries. The highest number of repatriation was from the UAE (3,30,058), followed by Saudi Arabia (1,37,900), Kuwait (97,802), Oman (72,259), Qatar (51,190), and Bahrain (27,453) (ILO, 2022).

In Asia, Chinese migrant workers were affected by the pandemic, leading to falling remittances and distressing conditions. A study estimated that 70 per cent of migrant workers lost part of their wages during the pandemic, pushing them into poverty (Zhang, Zhan, Diao, Chen & Robinson, 2021). Among the states in India, Kerala (after Delhi) witnessed the highest share of reverse migration, particularly from the GCC countries. The Government of Kerala's estimate showed that there were 1.4 million returnees by March 2022 in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic. Earlier, the NORKA Roots estimated a total of 15,36,278 return migrants to Kerala by July 2021. The study conducted by the Institute of Migration Studies and Development and the Centre for Indian Migration Studies (CIMS) documented several issues faced by migrants during the pandemic (Rajan &Akhil, 2022; Devi, 2021). These issues varied from job losses and wage theft to repatriation and reintegration problems The CIMS survey showed that there were instances of forced return without wages for months and even years. The survey conducted among 3345 migrant workers found that about 11 per cent of them (397) were denied wages and other benefits, and nearly 50 per cent of them were from the construction sector (Devi, 2021). NORKA also recorded that of the 1.53 million returnees, nearly 1 million Indians were reported to have faced job losses (NORKA, n.d.). If the estimates of returnees were accurate, the state of Kerala would have incurred a huge remittance loss.

Wage theft was, in fact, not a new development in the migration landscape. A report, however, indicated that this was so severe in times of the pandemic. During 2020-21, thousands of migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia were denied wages amounting to $25.5 million. The report pointed out that countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal (South Asia), Indonesia, and the Philippines (Southeast Asia) were the worst affected in terms of pay and benefit- related violations committed by employers and agencies in host countries (Piper & Foley, 2021; Nagaraj, Karim, & Barkawi, 2020). While international legal regimes stipulate strict labour standards for protecting the wages of workers, including migrant workers and fair labour remuneration practices, many host countries routinely violate these regulations.

A major problem associated with reverse migration in all countries is reintegration. A significant number of returnees have limited or no savings, and they carry debt burdens at different levels—from the beginning of migration itself. The origin countries also face several challenges in terms of allocating funds to undertake reintegration in the background of economic downturn. However, countries such as the Philippines have a relatively robust mechanism of reintegration of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). It is coordinated by the Department of Labour and Employment (DLE) and implemented by the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs, regional offices of DLE and the Overseas Welfare Administration. The reintegration programme encompasses a wide range of packages which include livelihood and skill training programmes, overseas workers' livelihood support packages, enterprise development interventions and loan facilities of the Small Business Corporation (Kang & Latoja, 2022). It may be noted that in 2019 the ASEAN Secretariat brought out some guidelines for return and reintegration with the support of the ILO. The ASEAN guidelines appeared to be still relevant in evolving reintegration strategies in times of a crisis like the pandemic. In fact, these reintegration strategies are in conformity with Article 26 of the ASEAN Consensus, which appealed to countries of origin to put in place broad reintegration programmes for returnees and their families. The ASEAN Consensus also appealed to the countries to chalk out an employment plan for returned migrant labour that reckon skills gained abroad. Currently, there is ample data obtainable on the modes of reintegration strategies, particularly for suffering returnees (ILO, 2022).

While the experience of Southeast Asia gives some hope for mitigating the conditions of the returned migrants, the situation in South Asia is not reassuring. There were, of course, calls for state intervention in such cases— based on reliable and transparent data on labour migration from South Asia. Way back in 2016, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) drafted a Plan of Action on Labour Migration at a consultative workshop which stipulated an obligation to information exchange and knowledge building on labour migration in the region. The Plan of Action also put in place a responsibility to "strengthen the capacity of government authorities to respond to the needs as well as improve the policy impact of migration" through actions such as "the creation of a shared database or web portal with information about migration trends and patterns, policies, best practices, challenges, agreements/arrangements where possible" (ILO, 2022). But, SAARC as a regional body itself had come to a halt with differences between India and Pakistan reaching a critical phase of heightened tensions. In effect, the reintegration plan for returned migrants in South Asia remained a distant dream, even as a state like Kerala initiated some measures through NORKA Roots to provide some relief to the returnees (Kerala State Planning Board, 2021; Rajan & Akhil, 2022).

Conclusion

A major challenge to human mobility in the twenty-first century is the changing socio-economic landscape of regions across the world. This has been perceptible in the context of the Gulf War (1990), the East Asian crisis (1997), the global financial crisis (2008), the Arab upheavals (2011) and, most profoundly, with the onset of the global pandemic (2020). The Asian continent has borne the brunt of the travails of all shifts and turns in global migratory spaces. Most of the regions in Asia—such as West Asia, East Asia, and South and Southeast Asia—experienced reversals in human mobility in different dimensions. However, in most countries in Asia, there are no effective mechanisms to tackle the problems of reverse migration and alternative livelihood options for the returnees. The Philippines, China and South Korea have relatively better mechanisms for problem management, risk reduction and mitigation. While international and regional organisations like ILO and ASEAN have put across guidelines for repatriation and reintegration, many countries routinely ignore them, thereby adding to the plight of returnees in many countries. This calls for appropriate state and civil society interventions in migration-related crises, including in the realm of rehabilitation and reintegration. Thus, human mobility—in terms of both outflows and inflows— requires effective monitoring and crisis-management mechanisms to tackle the challenges emerging in critical situations.

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