

## 20 **Patterns and Politics of Migration in South Asia**

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### **Abstract**

Migration is an important social and historical reality in South Asia. In the past decade, migration from one country to another and internal migration (i.e. migration within a particular country) have assumed different dimensions for people in the region. Contemporary research on migration is placed in a spectrum that ranges from exponents of economic benefits at one end, to those who see migration as a security threat, at the other. This paper combines the work of three researchers and looks at the different political locations from which the South Asian subject is induced to move. It also discusses the economic and political implications that arise from these migration trajectories. Drawing on their research, the authors emphasise the need for understanding how migration is linked to a complex set of processes that reflect power relations in unequal societies.

**Keywords:** South Asia; multi-locality; migration; remittances; livelihood; citizenship; frontiers.

## **20.1 Introduction**

Today, South Asia is the locus of extensive migrations that link cities and villages in the region to diverse places and that cut across the concerns of governments, policy-makers, migrants themselves and their families. Large migration streams already occurred at the outset of South Asia's post-colonial history, when millions fled communal violence on both sides of the Indian-Pakistani border. The significance of migration is likely to increase in future as a result of the global economic and climate crises. The patterns of migrations and their meanings vary, with motivations ranging from migrant workers' aspirations for upward mobility to the desire to escape from socio-economic or political distress.<sup>4</sup>

The present article<sup>5</sup> is based on migration research carried out mainly in Nepal and northeast India, complemented by case studies in Pakistan, within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme, and also on secondary literature. It highlights important commonalities and differences in the patterns and politics of mobility in South Asia. We first cover recent trends in labour migration and remittance flows, as well as the ambiguous impact of labour migration on the macro-economy, on migrants, and on the families they leave behind. Second, we examine the political economy of mobility. Besides an outline of institutional frameworks, especially those constructed for channelling labour migration, we provide a historical perspective on the demarcation of borders, which has often induced conflict and led to forced internal and international migration. Finally, we look at conceptual issues and question some common notions in mainstream discourses on migration. We emphasise migrants' multi-locality, the ambiguous role of social networks in enabling migration, and the political economy of colonial frontiers.

## **20.2 Migration patterns**

### **20.2.1 Recent trends in migration flows**

Migration is common throughout South Asia and its patterns are diverse. Today, the majority of South Asian migrants are workers who make significant contributions to the economies of both migrant-receiving and migrant-sending countries. Regional migration, such as between the neighbouring countries of India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan, has a long history that

remained largely undocumented for a long time (Schrader 1988; Gazdar 2003; Nichols 2008). East Asia and the Persian Gulf region have become other important destinations since the 1970s, for two major reasons. First, the oil-driven construction boom in the Gulf region created a demand for skilled and unskilled labour that the booming countries could not meet with their domestic labour force (Gazdar 2003). Second, the rapid expansion of mobile telecommunication and the Internet since the 1990s have accelerated the speed and volume of information on foreign employment opportunities. In Nepal, the private sector took the initiative to connect thousands of unemployed people – mainly youths – officially to labour markets overseas, whereas in Pakistan it was public institutions that promoted and facilitated the initial waves of contract labour migration to the Gulf region (Gazdar 2003; NIDS 2008). Increasingly restrictive immigration policies in host countries in the Gulf region have led to a rise in undocumented migration (Gazdar 2003; Shah 2006). For many people, both migration and living and working on a temporary contract basis have become a permanent feature of their lives. It has also become common for family members to live apart from each other and be organised in multiple locations throughout South Asia. Consequently, people's livelihoods have assumed multi-local dimensions (Thieme 2008).

Linkages between international and internal migrations are manifested throughout the region. For example, in the Indian state of Kerala, massive emigration of workers, mostly to the Gulf, has triggered a large inflow of migrant labour from other parts of India. This response to the labour shortage that arose in Kerala was motivated by higher agricultural and non-agricultural wages in Kerala.

A crucial aspect throughout the whole South Asian region is distress-induced migration, mostly to destinations that do not require official paper work and where there are no bureaucratic hurdles to be overcome, or where there is not much of a waiting period and where not many skills and capabilities or much initial investment are required. Migration between Nepal and India is facilitated by the open border between the two countries (Thieme 2006), whereas ethnic networks that transcend the Afghan-Pakistani border have eased the absorption of Afghani refugees in Pakistan (Gazdar 2003). Massive internal migration from the highlands of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) to the urban centres of Punjab and Sindh has been induced by low agricultural productivity under conditions of harsh climate, poor infrastructure, and few non-agricultural employment opportunities (Gazdar 2003; Steimann 2005).

### 20.2.2 The role of remittances

Common patterns identified in South Asia's experience with migration include the appreciation of remittances at various levels. With remittances of US\$ 27 billion in 2007, India is ahead of all other countries that also receive huge financial transfers from international migrants (Zachariah and Rajan 2006; World Bank 2008). According to World Bank estimates, remittances have grown exponentially for the past 35 years (World Bank 2006).

Labour migration is also an economic mainstay of Nepal's economy. However, there is still insufficient documentation on the scale and significance of this process. Kollmair et al (2006) compared the latest national statistics with nine case studies carried out within the NCCR North-South. Whereas the authors' estimate of 1.15 million migrants corresponds closely with the National Living Standard Survey (CBS 2004) and challenges estimates of up to 2 to 3 million Nepalese migrants working in foreign countries (Seddon et al 2001; estimates by Nepalese immigrant associations in India in Thieme 2006), the amount of remittances indeed seems to be higher than the official volume of US\$ 150 million. The estimated total of US\$ 604 million in 2003 is close to estimates by Graner and Seddon (2004). The amount of money remitted varies considerably from country to country. Although the majority of migrants (77%) go to India, they send the lowest share of remittances (less than 20%). Remittances from Western and Gulf countries represent 75% of workers' transfers to Nepal.

Within states, regional economies display different degrees of dependence on overseas workers' transfers. The highlands of Pakistan's NWFP, as well as the part of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistani administration, can plausibly be called remittance economies. Of all Pakistani provinces, rural NWFP is most dependent on foreign remittances. About one-tenth of average monthly income consists of remittance flows (Government of Pakistan 2007). Similarly, the state of Kerala in India is heavily dependent on worker remittances from the Gulf countries. Foreign remittances were seven times what Kerala received from the Government of India for the state budget and 1.6 times the state's annual governmental expenditures in 2004 (Zachariah and Rajan 2006).

Whereas migrant remittances help to fill the national exchequer with foreign exchange, the economic role of migration at the household and individual levels is ambiguous. The role of remittances in poverty reduction has been

emphasised across the region (Gazdar 1999; Bhattacharya and Deb 2006; Thieme 2006). There is evidence that migration from Nepal to India contributes to secure livelihoods (Thieme 2006). In rural communities with little cash income, even small transfers of cash may be of great value in reducing the risks of seasonality, harvest failure and food shortage (Ellis 2003). Moreover, aspects other than financial returns, such as sending goods, must also be taken into account. In addition, each person less in the household reduces total food consumption. Having family members in India assures access to medical treatment and schooling in India, and migrants cover these expenditures rather than sending money to Nepal (Thieme 2006). For Pakistan, Suleri and Savage (2006) highlight the fact that households receiving remittances were less vulnerable to the effects of the earthquake catastrophe that hit NWFP as well as Kashmir, on both sides of the Indian-Pakistani border, in 2005. Individuals had used the cash remitted by household members to reinforce their houses. While their neighbours' houses constructed with mud and stone were reduced to rubble, many of the cement mortar houses of families with migrant members withstood the quake.

On the other hand, regions where land and employment are scarce and poverty is widespread often become major migrant-sending regions. The mountainous districts of Pakistan's NWFP are examples. In the highland locations of a NCCR North-South study on sustainable livelihoods, a typical household had one or two (male) migrants. In the two villages studied, one out of four adult men was a migrant (Steimann 2005). The mountainous Dir and Swat districts bordering Afghanistan have displayed the highest absolute emigration of all rural districts in Pakistan in the past 25 years (BEOE 2007). At the same time, they are located at the bottom of the district-wise Human Development Index (Hussain 2003). The remittance economy of rural NWFP has created vulnerabilities of its own. Siegmann and Steimann (2005) found that irregular remittances are a source of major financial crisis for households in the region. A flow of cash transfers interrupted, for instance, by the illness or unemployment of a migrant, could disturb the delicate balance of indebtedness and repayment for households that hardly have access to other sources of cash income.

Overall, recent evidence of the poverty-reducing impact of migrant remittances has been scarce in the case of Pakistan. On the contrary, Ballard (2005) shows that in the absence of reasonable infrastructure and manufacturing activity in the international migrant-sending communities of Mirpur district, local banks redistribute surplus capital to the urban elite. They hence

fuel a cycle of ‘capital-rich underdevelopment’, which is likely to reinforce the local propensity to migrate. There is evidence that it is not the poorest income group for which foreign remittances represent the largest share of household income (Gazdar 2003; Azam 2005; Government of Pakistan 2007). This raises questions about the poverty-reducing effects of international migration. Similarly, in Nepal it is the better-off people, with more financial resources, education and access to information, who are more likely to go to the Gulf States, the East Asian ‘Tiger States’, or even Europe and the USA. Migrants with a more modest socio-economic background opt for neighbouring India, which is a more affordable journey.

### **20.2.3 Migration and social change**

The meaning of migration goes beyond remittance transfers, however. It has consequences that encompass radical changes in the lives of migrants as well as the communities to which they are connected back home.

In many parts of South Asia, migration changes the social spaces available to the individual. In deeply stratified caste communities, many see migration as a means to move away from constraining traditional occupations. In South India, migrants from the washer people’s castes in Tamil Nadu have occupied a highly organised niche in Kerala. They have not inserted themselves into caste-stratified social space, but have moved into urban residential localities as ‘mobile ironers’ who visit homes or offer their services on street corners, bringing along their coal and iron in push carts. These kin groups iron clothes for the households in the localities demarcated for them by municipal bodies, escaping day-to-day caste expectations in their original habitats in Tamil Nadu.<sup>6</sup>

Migration may also redefine the division of labour and responsibilities within a family. Different environments within South Asia display diverse dynamics, however. In the case of migrants’ wives in parts of Nepal, NCCR North-South researchers have found an increased workload but also greater participation in decision-making (Kaspar 2005). During the Maoist conflict in Nepal, women were left to negotiate with the conflicting parties, which was new in the Nepali societal context. In Pakistan, a feminisation of agricultural work (Kazi 1999) going hand in hand with a strengthened position for women in the household (Naveed-i-Rahat 1986; Alavi 1991) was associated with domestic and international emigration in some earlier studies. Others perceived greater vulnerability among migrants’ wives to exploitation

by their in-laws once their husbands moved abroad (Burki 1984). Lefebvre (1999), on the other hand, found stability in the gender division of labour and decision-making. He interprets this as evidence that economic improvement through foreign remittances must not be accompanied by a loss of prestige, as will inevitably be the case if the role and authority of women in a Pakistani village are radically transformed. Recent NCCR North-South related research has tended to support the latter conclusions. For mountainous districts in Pakistan's NWFP, women's workloads partially buffer the loss of male workers due to outmigration. At the same time, they do not gain higher status in the household. Considerations of family honour even increase the vulnerability of migrants' wives in the absence of their husbands (Siegmann 2007).

Children are also affected when remittances alone cannot replace the overall contribution of a family member to family care. The study quoted above indicates that socialisation of boys especially suffers when they lose a male authority figure to labour migration. In an environment where female mobility outside the home is severely constrained in the name of family honour, supervision of school attendance by boys, for instance, becomes a major challenge (Siegmann 2007).

Obviously, separation from their homes implies a burden on migrants themselves as well. In the host countries, migrants' movements are often restricted, their livelihoods unprotected, and they themselves discriminated against by their employers and the authorities (Thieme 2006; SDPI 2007a). Generally, Nepali migrants going to India possess limited financial means and are not well educated. On the segmented job markets in India, they do not learn new skills, incur even greater debts due to poorly run financial self-help groups and gambling, and face poor working conditions. Consequently, many migrants live from hand to mouth (Thieme and Müller-Böker 2004; Thieme 2006). Migrants' value systems are shaken by confrontation with a different culture (SDPI 2007b). In the 1980s, *Dubai chalo* ("Let's go to Dubai") became the label for a socio-psychological stress syndrome common amongst Pakistani international migrants to the Gulf States. It consists of a sense of disorientation resulting from harsh working conditions, social isolation, culture shock, and the sudden acquisition of relative wealth (Ahmed 1984). Many women migrants who move outside their home territories to perform domestic labour, home nursing or agricultural or non-agricultural labour, have insecure working and living arrangements that threaten their personal safety. International human rights organisations, for instance,

report a heightened risk of sexual abuse of female domestic workers from South and Southeast Asian countries employed in the Gulf States (Amnesty International 2005).

## **20.3 The politics of mobility**

### **20.3.1 Institutional frames and governmental responses**

In order to address the risks that labour migrants face, but also to regulate their movements and manage the associated financial flows, countries such as Bangladesh have constituted separate ministries for the welfare of their migrant communities overseas. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment is entrusted with protecting the rights and interests of Bangladeshi migrants in the host countries; ensuring the welfare of remittance senders; facilitating overseas employment for prospective Bangladeshi migrants and increasing their resource capabilities; and increasing the skills of the labour force (IOM 2006, p 219). In Pakistan, in the context of the ongoing re-shaping of the country's emigration policy, it has been suggested that research on migrant labour demand and supply as well as migrants' skill development be strengthened in the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, which is currently in charge of regulation, facilitation and monitoring of the process of emigration from Pakistan (BEOE 2007). In Nepal, structural changes at the government level were still under discussion at the time of writing of this article. It has been suggested that instead of having a separate government department, a foreign employment bureau under a public-private partnership would be better suited to address key issues affecting foreign employment and combine what is at stake in the private sector – such as recruiting agencies and banks – with concerns about public goods in the public sector (NIDS 2008).

South Asian national migration policies are often gendered, limiting the international migration of women. Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, until recently, Bangladesh have placed various types of restrictions on legal migration by their female citizens (IOM 2005; Piper 2005; Migrant Forum in Asia 2007). In Nepal, for example, women were not allowed to migrate to specific countries such as the Gulf States. This was to protect them from potential exploitation and harassment in domestic work. However, women continued to migrate in many other, often illegal and riskier ways, increasing their vulnerability (Thieme 2006; NIDS 2008). In Pakistan, a ban was

imposed on the recruitment of young females for overseas employment, after reports of sexual abuse of women in some Middle East countries had been received (Jolly and Reeves 2005). For the first time, the Draft Emigration Policy currently under preparation is intended to promote selective female labour migration (Ghayur 2008).

### **20.3.2 Political economy of frontiers**

Public efforts to manage migration not only mirror the gender norms of the subcontinent, but also reflect the post-colonial history of border-making in South Asia. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed bold cartographic exercises that resulted in demarcation of national territories and spaces. However, these were carried out on a terrain that was for the most part not easy to map, such as the Bengal and Assam borderlands and the eastern Himalayan region, or the mountainous border regions that separate Pakistan from India and Afghanistan. This resulted in the transformation of ambiguous frontiers into national boundaries within which populations were subjected to different policies regulating identity, livelihood and mobility (Hutt 2003; van Schendel 2005). Cartographic solutions for post-colonial countries have also transformed the language of citizenship (Baruah 2005). States in the South Asian region must regulate the movement of people from territories that are contiguous and porous. Migration thus forces reconsideration of given categories of space and identity. It is a crucial element in what Rouse calls “a world of crisscrossed economies, intersected systems of meaning and fragmented identities” that challenge the notions of centre and periphery, of citizenship and nationality (Rouse 1991, pp 8–9).

Barbora (2007) looks at how this historical process has created modern problems of forced migration, the complexity of which South Asian governments are ill-equipped to handle. Forced migration is a very pertinent issue in South Asia. The movement of refugees fleeing from conflicts in Sri Lanka (to India) and Afghanistan (to Pakistan); forced eviction of Nepali-speaking citizens from Bhutan (to Nepal); forced migration of Muslim Rohingya from Burma (to Bangladesh); and periodic migrations of ethnic minorities such as the Nagas and the Chins from Burma (to northeast India) owing to conflict are part of the international dynamic of conflict-induced migration in South Asia. Insistence on a unitary citizenship regime has exacerbated this problem in places such as northeast India.

However, population flows between and within states are as much a result of a lack of human security arising from armed conflicts and natural disasters as they are a concern for states that see population movements as a reason for security legislation and regulation. This securitisation of migration has been seen in northeast India as well. Since the 1960s, ethnic conflicts and political confrontation have broken out over the issue of migration. As a result, the Indian state and significant portions of civil society have begun to view migration as a threat to social order (Bhattacharyya 2001; De 2005).<sup>7</sup> The response to such concerns has been to bar entry to anyone suspected of being a migrant, with the adjective ‘illegal’ prefixed to the already vulnerable migrant. This notion of illegality is something that makes social space very contentious for ethnic minorities in regions like northeast India.

The phenomenon of internal forced migration has also been subjected to critical inquiry within the South Asian context. Some of this migration is linked to conflict, although much of it is linked to developmental strategies pursued by South Asian states (Banerjee et al 2005, pp 13–29). Conflict-induced internal forced migration has to do with the manner in which ethnic communities have been forced to negotiate territorial arrangements in different states. In India’s northeast, ethnic groups often contend with one another over territorial reorganisation of existing federal units. Claims to exclusive homelands have resulted in large-scale conflict and displacement (Kumar Das 2005, pp 113–143). The areas where such processes take place are also highly militarised. The sustained deployment of government forces, violent activities carried out by armed ethnic militia, and lack of constitutional safeguards for indigenous communities have made India’s northeast a hub for conflict-induced forced migration within the territorial borders of India (Barbora 2009).

## **20.4 Summary and conceptual reflections**

The dignity of migrants must be respected and their contributions to the economy appreciated by societies and national governments in South Asia. However, this is easier said than done. Insights resulting from migration-related research conducted by the NCCR North-South have highlighted that efforts to show such respect and appreciation are still fragmentary and need to be calibrated by a nuanced grasp of what constitutes the life of a migrant and where migrants look for support.

There must be a shift of focus from financial flows to the well-being of migrants and their families and communities in order to produce more nuanced analyses of the patterns and politics of migration in South Asia. In order to understand the multi-locality of migrants' livelihoods, for instance, the relations of migrants to their places of origin as well as linkages to their other places of residence and work must be considered. These places are distinctive in terms not only of their spatial context but also of their social context, whereas work, household formation and day-to-day activities differ in their nature and consequences. The way migrants live is influenced by social identities and structures from 'home' (i.e. their place of origin) as much as by the structures of new places of residence (Thieme 2008). For example, social networks formed by family members or friends are essential for low-skilled migrants to find a job in new destinations. While this social capital is appreciated in some parts of the labour market, it carries no value in other sub-fields of the labour market – for example, when migrants look for better-paid or higher-skilled jobs. In addition, the same social capital that can help some colleagues to find a job may exclude others if they cannot satisfy certain preconditions laid down by their fellow villagers in order to obtain a job.

The role of social networks in enabling migration has been emphasised in mainstream discourses. Using evidence of exclusion through networks as a springboard, researchers associated with the NCCR North-South have questioned their purely positive role as 'social capital'. They have opened the black box of the household to capture power relations linked to the stratifiers of gender and generation. Siegmann and Thieme (2007) suggest that relations of domination and subordination within networks of family and kin determine whether household members experience a greater degree of vulnerability or of resilience as a result of migration.

Attention to the embeddedness of migration in a political economy of border-making is also necessary. The post-colonial history of the sub-continent has shown that frontiers are not given, but are drawn and guarded with intent. This sheds light on discourses on globalisation, transnationalism and time and space compression that undermine the nation-state as a unit of regulation or analysis. It has also become apparent that transnational ties are circumscribed in important ways – by the regulatory authorities of migrant-receiving states in the form of immigration criteria and procedures, and in the policies that migrant-sending states apply to their overseas citizens or co-ethnics (e.g. Kelly 2003). These increasing restrictions on migra-

tion have contributed to an increase in activities in the informal and illegal sectors that block the social mobility of migrants.

Challenges in further migration research in South Asia are associated with power relations from the intra-household to the national and international levels. These need to be conceptualised not as fixed resources but as fluid and changing conditions. There is also a need for multi-local research. A complete record of migration patterns and circuits will reveal the possible linkages between internal and international migration, the linkages between different sources of income, and how power relations between people change. In addition, research should take account not only of 'the migrant' and his or her household members but also of non-migrating people affected by migration owing to the fact that they live in the receiving place (e.g. Thieme 2008).

Migration and the resulting multi-locality of livelihoods can be driving forces that challenge power imbalances. However, migration and multi-locality do not always generate greater equality; they can also produce inequality and exclusion, and do not therefore necessarily provide human security.

## Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> We do not address marital migration here, although it is probably the most common type of migration in South Asia.

<sup>5</sup> This article is based on Barbora et al (2008).

<sup>6</sup> The authors wish to thank Vineetha Menon for sharing this information (personal communication, December 2006).

<sup>7</sup> This concern is widespread among non-state actors in South Asia. We wish to cite two examples of such concerns in the region. The National Human Rights Commission in Nepal mentions in its report of 2005 (NHRC Nepal 2005) that trafficking of women and children along its long and porous border with India is a cause for concern. It also states that non-governmental organisations have been asked to help with detection and interception of supposed victims of trafficking along selected border points. Migration rights activists argue that such measures go against notions of agency and restrict the livelihood options of mobile populations. In another example, the All Assam Students Union has been at the forefront of the demand to seal the border between India and Bangladesh, as it claims that there are daily incursions of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into northeastern Indian states such as Assam. In response to such demands, the government of India has often rounded up "suspected" Bangladeshi migrants and, in violation of domestic and international law, forced them into the no-man's-land between the two countries.

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