



**REGIONAL SEMINAR**  
**on**  
**Labour Migrants from South Asia:**  
**Issues and Concerns**

**Tuesday, 23 April 2024**

**Organised by**  
**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)**  
**Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT)**  
**Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)**





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# REGIONAL SEMINAR ON LABOUR MIGRANTS FROM SOUTH ASIA: ISSUES AND CONCERNS



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in collaboration with the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) and Political Dialogue Asia Programme, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organised a Regional Seminar on “Labour Migrants from South Asia: Issues and Concerns” on Tuesday, April 23, 2024, at Dhaka, Bangladesh. **Dr Mashiur Rahman**, Economic Affairs Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh graced the seminar as the Chief Guest. **Md Khairul Alam**, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was present as the Special Guest. **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, Chaired the inaugural session. **Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, ndc afwc, psc, G+**, Director General of BIISS and **Dr Nishchal N Pandey**, Convener, COSATT delivered the welcome addresses. **Mr Andreas Klein**, Director, Regional Programme, Political Dialogue Asia, KAS, Singapore delivered the Vote of Thanks.

The conference was divided into two working sessions. The first working session focused on “Labour Migrants from South Asia: Contemporary Challenges”. This session was chaired by **Dr Tasneem Siddiqui**, Professor and Chairperson, Department of Political Science, University of

Dhaka. Five presenters – **Shariful Islam Hasan**, Programme Head, BRAC Migration Programme, Dhaka; **Dr Mallika Joseph**, Senior Fellow, WISCOMP, New Delhi; **Mahesh Raj Bhatta**, Research Officer, Centre for South Asian Studies, Kathmandu; **Shishir Khanal**, Member of Parliament, Kathmandu and **Colonel Nalin Herath**, Acting Director General, Institute of National Security Studies, Colombo participated in the first session.

The second working session was concentrated on “Addressing Challenges: Regional Cooperation and Partnerships”. This session was chaired by **Megha Sarmah**, Programme Manager 2030 Agenda, KAS, Singapore. The second session also had five presentations from **Dr Benuka Ferdousi**, Senior Research Fellow, BISS, Dhaka; **Sugeeswara Senadhira**, Advisor, The Prime Minister’s Office, Colombo; **Hernaikh Singh**, Deputy Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore; **Anu Maria Joseph**, Research Associate, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and **Dr Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury**, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata. Both sessions were followed by open discussion.

Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors, high commissioners, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, media, academia, researchers, faculties and students from various universities, and representatives from international organisations participated in the seminar and enriched it by presenting their valuable questions, opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.



# INAUGURAL SESSION

## WELCOME ADDRESS



**Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, ndc, afwc, psc, G+**

*Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)*

At the outset, **Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan** paid his solemn reverence to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the main architect of Bangladesh's independence. He also paid tribute to all the martyrs and freedom fighters who made their supreme sacrifices for the liberation of their motherland.

The Director General stated that the issue of labour migration from South Asia is not merely a statistical figure or a trend; it indicates the hopes, dreams, and struggles of millions of individuals who seek livelihoods far away from their homes. South Asia, mostly known for its rich cultural diversity and economic vibrancy, is also a region where millions are compelled to leave their homes in search of better opportunities due to various socio-economic factors.

He emphasised on the significant contributions made by labour migrants from South Asia to the global economy. Their hard work, resilience, and unwavering determination have propelled industries, filled critical gaps in labour markets, and sustained economies around the world. However, amidst these contributions, there is a multitude of challenges and injustices that cannot be overlooked.

He argued that one of the primary concerns facing labour migrants from South Asia is the issue of exploitation and abuse. Migrants are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers who take advantage of their desperation and lack of legal protection. Moreover, the plight of migrant workers is worsened by systemic issues such as restrictive immigration policies, lack of legal safeguards, and inadequate access to justice. Many find themselves in precarious legal situations, unable to assert their rights or seek recourse for injustices they face. This creates a cycle of vulnerability and exploitation.

Another pressing concern, according to him, is the impact of labour migration on families and communities left behind. While migrant workers strive to provide for their loved ones, they often face emotional distress and separation from their families for extended periods. He added that labour migration from South Asia is intricately linked to broader issues such as poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities. This not only affects their mental well-being but also disrupts the social fabric of their communities, leaving behind a generation of children deprived of parental care and guidance.

In light of these challenges, he stressed on collective action to address the issues and concerns faced by labour migrants from South Asia. This, according to him, requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses policy reform, legal empowerment, social protection, and cross-border cooperation. He further emphasised that the South Asian countries should work together to uphold the rights and dignity of migrant workers, ensure their access to justice and social services, and create an enabling environment for safe and dignified migration.

In this connection, he reminded the audience that the issue of labour migration is not just a matter of economics or politics; it is a matter of humanity. It is about recognising the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their nationality or social status. It is about building a world where every person can live and work with dignity, equality, and respect.

In conclusion, he called for reaffirming commitment to standing in solidarity with labour migrants from South Asia and all migrant workers around the world. He also suggested continuing advocacy for their rights, amplifying their voices, and working towards a future where migration is a choice, not a necessity. He concluded his speech by envisioning a world where every individual can realise their full potential and contribute to the common good.



## WELCOME ADDRESS



### Dr Nishchal N Pandey

*Convener, Consortium for South Asian Think Tanks  
(COSATT)*

In his address, **Dr Nishchal N Pandey** expressed deep appreciation for the collaborative effort between COSATT and BIIS in organising the seminar, highlighting its relevance and timeliness amidst the participation of leaders and representatives from major South Asian think tanks. Dr Pandey emphasised the pivotal role played by migrant workers in the economies of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, particularly underscoring their contributions during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic. He stressed the

crucial significance of remittances sent back home by these migrant workers, which played a vital role in sustaining the economies of their respective countries during the unprecedented global crisis. Additionally, Dr Pandey noted the invaluable contribution of migrant workers in bringing back newfound skills and technical expertise, which, he remarked, would continue to benefit their home countries in the long term.

Dr Pandey also pointed out some growing concerns, such as labour shortages in the countries of origin, the myriad of familial and health-related issues faced by migrant workers, and the pressing need for enhanced coordination and collaboration among nations, particularly during times of crisis, notably in regions such as the Middle East.

In his speech, Dr Pandey commended COSATT as a unique platform that has consistently fostered collaboration and dialogue among diverse stakeholders in South Asia, including think tanks, academics, policymakers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and media professionals. He highlighted the invaluable role played by COSATT in facilitating informed debates and discussions on various regional issues encompassing politics, misinformation, environmental concerns, and a myriad of other disciplines. Dr Pandey proudly proclaimed that for the past sixteen years, COSATT has remained steadfast in its commitment to promoting regional cooperation and fostering a conducive environment for constructive dialogue in South Asia.

Dr Pandey then drew attention to an often-overlooked facet of migration, namely, internal mobility within the South Asian region itself. He highlighted the staggering statistic of an estimated ten million migrants within the South Asian region, stressing the importance of improving connectivity

and infrastructure to enable free movement of individuals for work opportunities within the region. This, he argued, would not only contribute to regional economic growth but also foster greater social cohesion and integration among South Asian nations.

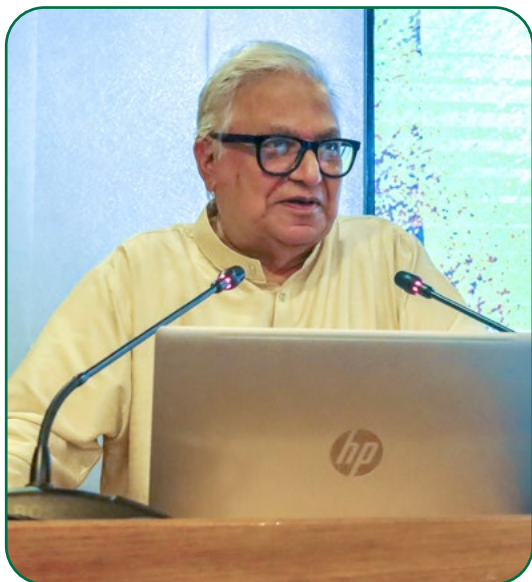
He echoed the sentiments expressed by the Director General of BIISS and various organisations and NGOs working tirelessly across South Asia to formulate and implement policies aimed at mitigating the vulnerabilities faced by migrants, particularly women and girls, both in their countries of origin and destination. Dr Pandey stressed the imperative for cohesive policy frameworks that intertwine migration with human security, local economic development, and social protection measures.

Furthermore, Dr Pandey underscored the urgent need for enhanced coordination among South Asian countries in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by migrant labours. He reiterated that South Asian nations should view each other not as competitors but as allies in navigating the complexities of migration and labour mobility. Dr Pandey also highlighted the environmental factors and shifting socio-economic dynamics that contribute to rural to urban migration within the region, thereby accentuating the need for comprehensive policy responses that address the root causes of migration.

In his closing remarks, Dr Pandey expressed his profound appreciation for the esteemed panel of experts assembled for the conference, anticipating that their insights would provide valuable perspectives on addressing the myriad challenges faced by the labour migrants from South Asia. He extended heartfelt thanks to BIISS for organising the event and ensuring its success. Additionally, he expressed gratitude to Mr Andreas Klein and Ms Megha Sharmah from KAS and the COSATT team for their unwavering support, which has enabled the consortium to host regional events across South Asian countries. As he concluded his speech, Dr Pandey extended his sincere appreciation to the attendees, acknowledging their commitment towards fostering regional cooperation and addressing the challenges of labour migrants from South Asia.



## ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF GUEST



### Dr Mashiur Rahman

*Economic Affairs Adviser to the Hon'ble Prime Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

**Dr Mashiur Rahman** began his speech by confirming his respects to all the participants and his gratitude to the BIIS for inviting him to this session. Giving the example of the AstraZeneca vaccine, he illustrated the industrial and trade connections and asked the audience to think of placing migration in the context of the connection between trade and industrial production. He said that doing so will provide an idea about where the bottlenecks are and what can be done to overcome them.

He then highlighted the importance of remittance in Bangladesh's economy especially in the rural economy. Remittance contributes about 8-10 per cent (depending on export performance and other factors) of Bangladesh's GDP. It has a very significant impact on its rural economy in terms of escalating and structuring the consumption pattern of the rural population. The consumption pattern also impacts the nature of production in the rural areas.

Regarding the use of remittance, he drew attention to the fact that remittances are not usually spent for investment. He said that migrants tend to spend money on the purchase of land because they are not aware of the sophisticated methods of investment. However, another dimension is that in rural societies and for people who do not have access to investments in the urban industrial sector, land is a symbol of social status. Additionally, land is considered as an insurance. If the migrant has some land to fall back on, he or she does not face much economic problem upon returning.

Dr Rahman then discussed the drivers of migration. He argued that migrant origin and destination countries are linked by opposite economic and demographic forces. Destination countries such as the Middle East and most of the European countries, have a declining population and a shortage of workers. On the other hand, South Asian countries have a surplus of labour and they are in a situation where they want to expand employment opportunities. He went on saying that when the Middle East started generating huge revenue by exporting energy, they invested heavily in infrastructure which created an increasing demand for low-skill workers. On the other hand, there was an abundance of labour in South Asia. The supply and the demand structure of origin and destination countries thus met the needs of one another.

He then touched upon the typology of migration. He referred to the World Bank's World Development Report for 2023 and 2024 in this regard. The reports categorised migration as follows: those who seek employment, those who seek asylum and those who are forced to migrate because of security reasons. Dr Rahman then argued that there are specific international protocols and regulations for the asylum seekers. For employment, the World Bank suggests that the demand for and supply of skill should match. It is imperative to develop the skill of the workforce to send abroad after meeting domestic demand. In his opinion, most of the countries of South Asia are not in that situation except Sri Lanka. By the end of the 1960s or early 1970s, Sri Lanka had become the leading country in South Asia in terms of literacy rate and level of education. Therefore, they have a larger supply of skilled manpower compared to most of the countries in South Asia.

Regarding the labour demand, he said that domestic demand for labour depends on the pattern of industrialisation. Same is true for destination countries. This is why people who migrate to the Western countries tend to have higher level of skill. Noting that the Western countries have been going through population decline and automation for a long time, he commented that the growth of demand for labour in the Western countries will not be similar to that in the Middle East. He also noted the difference in nature of labour demanded. In the Middle East, there was a strong focus on physical infrastructure which suited South Asian countries well. However, after the development of infrastructure, they are now in the stage of upgradation of infrastructure. Upgrading the infrastructure depend on the use of technological devices that does not require much manual labour. The South Asian countries' skill set does not have the exact match to that situation, he observed. Therefore, there is a mismatch between demand and supply of skilled workforce.



Dr Rahman then discussed whether it was possible to train and develop skills specially for export of manpower. He believed that it was not possible unless the domestic education system and the domestic skill development system are improved. He added that in that case it is not possible to isolate a particular set of demands and train people for that. Such initiatives also involve a lot of expenditure. There is also a possibility that after setting up a number of institutions for specialised skill development, there is no demand for those skills at home or abroad. Although Bangladesh is not in that situation yet, there is a mismatch between what is demanded and what Bangladesh can supply.

He then focused on the troubles of the migrant workers and emphasised that no South Asian country alone can address these issues. He added that though there are ILO standards for migrant workers, ILO or any UN organisation alone cannot enforce their regulations. It mostly depends on the willingness of the governments and the enforcement capacity of the international organisations. In this regard, he mentioned about Bangladesh's RMG sector.

Dr Rahman then talked about the changing nature of industrial production. Industrial production is now organised on the lines of the value chain which is passed across countries. The horizontal and vertical integration is now becoming more and more obsolete. For example, a final product of 10 components is now produced in four or five countries, and then brought to a final place for assembly and branding. If South Asian countries are not included in this dispersed value chain, then neither they will be able to participate in the production nor can they send workers abroad.

Dr Rahman then focused on Nepal's access to the Indian labour market and so on. He noted that about 85 to 90 per cent of Nepal's trade is with India. There is also a monetary integration between these two countries. Moreover, one does not need a passport or a visa in order to move between India and Nepal. He commented that this arrangement resembles with that of the European Union arrangement which Nepal and India had set up much before the European Union was considered by the European countries. That is something for South Asia to take pride in, he expressed.

Giving the example of English-speaking workers in the Middle East, he reiterated the importance of the general scheme of education and training inside the country. He commented that sending workers abroad is not exactly a policy choice. Policy choice is something that the government can change or can devise to suit its conditions. But when it comes to migration, the situation is dependent on the demand of the destination countries. And if the structure or composition of the economies of destination countries change, the sending countries have to respond to that if they want to continue the migration flow. In order to be able to do that, the sending countries have to have within the country a system of training that suits not only domestic demand but also the demand of the manpower importing country, he reiterated.

Dr Rahman then shared his perception on the recruitment process. He said that all the union headquarters of Bangladesh are now connected by digital devices. There is a system where those

who want to go abroad, can enlist their names. And when there is a drive for recruitment, this information is also sent to them. Again, if one looks at the regional distribution of migrants from Bangladesh, one will find heavy concentration in the Chittagong division. This is due to the fact that aspirant migrants from this region benefit from communication with previous migrants from that area. However, the real problem is not solved by that. Communication with migrants abroad does not guarantee employment. If more jobs are not created overseas, there will be less opportunity for overseas employment. He then touched upon irregular migration and shared a personal experience to show how it takes place.

He concluded his speech with the reiteration that as long as an abundant labour supply is present, countries need to find employment abroad because not enough jobs are being created within the country. He concluded by thanking the organisers and the participants for the event and for inviting him and giving him a chance of sharing his perceptions.



## VOTE OF THANKS



### Andreas Klein

*Director, Regional Programme, Political Dialogue  
Asia, KAS, Singapore*

At the beginning of his remarks, **Mr Andreas Klein** endorsed all the points that were discussed by the previous speakers. He also acknowledged the contribution of the labour migrants and recognised them as remarkable individuals. He further stated that labour migrants take a considerable risk by leaving their home nations, abandoning their families and children, and embarking on journeys to foreign lands, often with cultures that are markedly different from their own. And, by working in foreign lands, they make valuable contributions to the economies of both origin

and destination countries. On the other hand, when labour migrants work abroad, they acquire valuable expertise that they could potentially bring back to their home countries. In this connection, he mentioned the example of Germany, which, according to him, is one of the countries that has greatly benefited from labour migration in recent decades. The influx of migrant workers from South Europe, Turkey and various other countries played a crucial role in the reconstruction of Germany following the extensive damage caused by the World War II. Although there are contributions of German citizens in the recovery process, a big part came from migrant workers.

Acknowledging the contributions of labour migrants in Germany, Mr Klein stated that in the contemporary time, the Western societies are depending on migrant workers from all over the world even more. He further argued that though labour migration is influencing the demography of the Western countries, it is important to note that labour migrants are also bringing numerous benefits and playing an essential role in ensuring the well-being of the Western societies.

In conclusion, Mr Klein opined that the demographic changes in the Western societies, particularly in Europe are causing the rise of populism and racism. However, he noted that Germany is making efforts to embrace foreigners and migrant workers in order to enhance their well-being. Finally, he hoped that the seminar will provide opportunity to hear from the experts from South Asia which, he hoped, would contribute in making things better and promoting a better image of the western societies.



## REMARKS BY THE CHAIR



**Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**  
*Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of  
International and Strategic Studies (BISS)*

**Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker** began by acknowledging Mr Andreas' insightful perspective, which rightfully outlined the background of post-war Germany's guest workers and their significant contribution to its reconstruction. This, he noted, was just one phase in the longstanding history of migrant workers in developed economies. Ambassador Sarker asserted that migration has been a persistent phenomena that has lasted for centuries, driven by a variety of demands and historical settings.

Addressing the distinguished audience, Ambassador Sarker highlighted the notable economic advancements in Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian nations since the 1970s, which ushered in a new era of opportunities for diverse workers from South Asia. In the 1980s, migration from South Asia to GCC countries surged, with the Middle East and Southeast Asia emerging as primary destinations. Notably, Malaysia and Singapore attracted significant number of workers due to their stable political climate and robust multi-sector economies.

Ambassador Sarker observed a growing complexity in migration in recent times. He pointed to the global rise of xenophobia, racism, and nativist narratives, coupled with geo-economic fragmentation, as concerning trends. Additionally, he lamented the plight of illegal migrants, both workers and non-workers, who, amidst global recession and instability, sought to escape poverty through any means necessary. Within this grim reality, migrant workers are faced with a myriad of challenges, including exploitation by middlemen and employers, exacerbated by the illegal status of the migrant workers.

Despite these challenges, Ambassador Sarker acknowledged some positive developments in destination countries. For instance, Saudi Arabia's recent reforms aimed to grant workers more freedom to change employers, potentially reducing instances of abuse. Similarly, the European Union's directive on transparent and predictable working conditions represented a step forward in safeguarding workers' rights, irrespective of nationality. He expressed hope for similar initiatives to emerge, ultimately safeguarding workers' welfare and curbing illegal immigration.

Furthermore, he underscored the importance of international cooperation, particularly among South Asian countries, in addressing migration issues. He advocated for the enforcement of the Global Compact on Migration to uphold migrants' rights and encouraged collective action towards training human resources tailored to destination countries' needs.

In his closing remarks, Ambassador Sarker highlighted the significance of meaningful discussions on the concerns of labour migrants and hoped that the regional seminar will provide a platform for such exchange and collaboration. He commended the efforts of governments, including Bangladesh's, in harnessing the potential of its youth to contribute meaningfully to the global economy. He expressed optimism for constructive cooperation among countries and development partners to facilitate safe, orderly, and mutually beneficial economic migration.

He concluded by extending gratitude to the attendees and speakers, including the Chief Guest Dr Mashiur Rahman for their invaluable contributions. He looked forward to further discussions and insights from experts and analysts, aimed at broadening understanding and fostering international cooperation for improved migration policies.

# WORKING SESSION I: LABOUR MIGRATION FROM SOUTH ASIA: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

## Presentation 1

### Contemporary Challenges of Labour Migrants: Bangladesh Perspective



**Shariful Islam Hasan**

*Programme Head, BRAC Migration Programme*

At the beginning of his deliberation, **Shariful Islam Hasan** identified three groups of people as the drivers of Bangladesh economy whom he expressed by three letters “EFG” – expatriate workers, farmers and garment workers. Regarding the expatriate workers, he showed some latest statistics and informed that, in every hour 150 people are migrating from Bangladesh. He noted that over the past years, there has been a significant increase in labour migration from Bangladesh, reaching a record high level of 13,05453 in 2023. He added that data indicates a significant increase in labour migration from Bangladesh and this has been

reflected in the report of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in which Bangladesh was ranked as the sixth largest country in the world in terms of the number of migrants and the eighth largest country in terms of the amount of remittance received. In this regard, Mr Hasan pointed out that though labour migration from Bangladesh is concentrated in the Gulf countries, the country is also sending migrants to other Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore in an increasing number. He noted that India, Pakistan, and Nepal are also sending an increasing number of labour migrants to these Asian countries.

Mr Hasan then pointed out the challenges that Bangladeshi labour migrants face abroad. According to him, poor conditions of living is a challenge for Bangladeshi labour migrants. For example, in Middle eastern countries, characterised by extremely high temperatures, labour migrants have to live in extremely hot climate which frequently have a negative impact on their overall health. As a result, many of them suffer from diseases that are potentially fatal to them. Also, majority of them



are forced to live in dire conditions with 15 to 30 migrants accomodating in a small room. Due to poor living conditions, dead bodies of Bangladeshi migrants are frequently being brought back. Over the last 15 years, a total of 45,000 deceased migrants had been received.

Another point Mr Hasan highlighted is the issue of loneliness experienced by labour migrants, which is often overlooked in the discussion. They experience loneliness because they had left their family members and relatives back home. They suffer from anxiety due to lonliness. This is because they always live in a state of apprehension, fearing the loss of their spouse or the loss of their property since they live away and cannot see what is occurring within their household.

Mr Hasan then touched upon the social cost of migration. It refers to the effect of labour migration on the family members who are left behind by the labour migrants. However, the effects of migration are not uniformly felt by all members of a family. It varies by gender, age, economic status, and participation in family decision-making. To put it simply, the impact of migration would vary between adult males and females in a family. Besides, the children would perceive the effects of migration in a distinct manner compared to the adult members of the family. Even, the impact of migration on children would further differ depending on their gender. The same impact happens to the male and female spouses who are left behind by the labour migrants.

Language barrier is another challenge that was highlighted by Mr Hasan in his presentation. Over half of Bangladeshi expats, particularly those in the Gulf states, have trouble communicating due to a lack of proficiency in the local language, which has a negative impact on their ability to make a living while they are working overseas. Then, Mr Hasan suggested handling the underlying

factors contributing to the increasing number of Bangladeshi individuals seeking asylum abroad. According to him, asylum seekers typically come from countries that have been devastated by war and are experiencing tremendous economic suffering. Although Bangladesh does not have these conditions, a number of people from Bangladesh apply for international protection. This is mostly because of economic reason as people want a better life for themselves and their families. But, apart from economic reason, other factors also need to be identified.

Mr Hasan then talked about the number of people who have returned to their home countries, with the majority from the Middle East. In this regard, he pointed out the fact that there is a paucity of data regarding the precise number of returnees who are returning home after spending years serving abroad. The majority of people return home because they have lost their jobs, their visas have expired, or they are physically disabled. In this context, Mr Hasan emphasised that lack of skills is one of the most significant obstacles that prevent migrants from continuing to work in better positions. Regarding this matter, he asserted that Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian nations primarily hire unskilled labourers from Bangladesh, but European countries and Japan in Asia require people with specialised capabilities, including language skill. Then, Mr Hasan touched upon the problems related to “middleman” in the process of migration. The “middleman” or “sub-agents” play a crucial role in the labour movement cycle. Migrants rely more on informal brokers rather than approved recruiters and official institutions due to their close proximity to the middleman and the lack of strict supervision. In conclusion, Mr Hasan, suggested working together to address those challenges.



## Presentation 2

# Refugees, Migrants and Diaspora: The Gendered Global Movement of People and Their Multiple Merginalities



### Dr Mallika Joseph

*Senior Fellow, Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), New Delhi*

**Dr Mallika Joseph** focused on the gender perspective of migration in her presentation. She shared the findings of a special issue of a journal that she had edited for WISCOMP. In that issue of the journal on COVID-19 pandemic and gender, four of the six papers from six countries focused on women migrant labourers and the impact of the pandemic on them. According to her, these articles were a testament about the magnitude of women migrants' suffering during the pandemic. She then elaborated on the findings of the papers.

The paper from India brought in how COVID-19 pandemic surfaced a lot of inequalities and issues that were there in the system. More poignantly, it exposed the vulnerability of the marginalised communities. Within the marginalised communities, the informal sector was highlighted and how the migrant labours were suffering within this construct of the informal sector was very strongly emphasised. She said that the lower the migrants were in the chain, the more marginality they faced and the more difficult their access to services became. And further below the chain is the women migrant workers. Additionally, there was dual precarity; at one end they were engaged in informal labour and at the other end they also had the gender dimensions. They were caught between both and they suffered significantly because of that. And beyond that, they had to face multifaceted politics – politics of migrants versus locals, first time job seekers versus people who have established linkage for a long time and also foreigners versus natives. They had to navigate all these marginalities even during normal times, but during the pandemic it was all the more enhanced. There was also a stereotyping of particular sectors they could engage in. Most of the time they were pushed either into domestic work or care work. These sectors were marked by a lack of safe and clean sanitation. They were at increased occupational risks, and they constantly were under threat of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Because they were engaged in informal sectors, the recourse to services or access to justice was limited for them. They were also at the lower end of the power access; they did not even have the status of an employee.

Most of these concerns are common across all migrant labours, however, for women migrants, it was more pronounced.

She then shared a story of some women migrants from Jharkhand. About 2000 women from Jharkhand got trained as tailors and moved to Tripura. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they could not go back due to lockdowns and were in a near prison-like situation. The owners confined them to hostels, they did not have food and they had to cope with that place with unfamiliar language and people. They were later rescued with the assistance of the government and some NGOs. Though they were skilled and had briefly felt empowered, when they went back to Jharkhand after the pandemic, they did not want to come back because of their prior experience. Most of them have returned to lower-paying jobs in agricultural sector, some are even doing odd jobs. Thus, for most of them, the path towards empowerment has been closed.

Dr Joseph then discussed the case of Bangladesh and talked about its informal sector. The paper from Bangladesh was written by researchers from BRAC. Those researchers had argued that there is a lot of research which show how people who are working in the informal sector are excluded from mainstream institutions and are denied access to basic services that the government provides. When one looks at the number of people working in the informal sector, they need to consider that in that particular context. In this connection, she gave the example of HelloTask, an online service providing app for household work. The study on Bangladesh compared workers who were working through HelloTask agency with people who were directly employed at houses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most independent workers lost their jobs. But those who were employed





through the HelloTask could negotiate and get some salary and were not laid off. They received some partial salaries and could work under fixed hours and the workers felt more dignified working as part of the agency. Even though the HelloTask agency employed workers in the informal sector, the workers were provided with some support since they were connected to an institution.

Moving on to Nepal, she highlighted the woes of women migrant workers there. Nepal is one of the top remittance receivers and nearly 25 per cent of its GDP comes from remittance. According to a Nepali official statistics, there are 4.5 million male migrant workers while only 0.2 million migrants are female. Top destinations for women are Qatar, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. However, there are gender-specific restrictions for women migrants. The migration policies are different for women, and they also face country-specific restrictions. There is an age bar for women migrants. Furthermore, Women migrants also need to provide guardian's consent. All these barriers restricts women from moving abroad freely for work. Because of the stricter regulations, more women try the illegal route of migration which exposes them to additional vulnerabilities of sexual abuse, exploitation, and harassment. The illegal route makes them vulnerable to trafficking and their undocumented status creates additional issues. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were required to be brought back, they could not provide any documents. There was no paperwork for them in the countries of destination. The returned women also faced various challenges. A lot of them were pregnant and faced a lot of slander and defamation, and there was concern that their children born in this situation may never get citizenship.

In conclusion, she wanted to highlight that when one looks at what people generally refer to as a migrant crisis, it is not a migrant crisis, rather it is a crisis of inequality that needs to be addressed. And this crisis of inequality is reflected in the differentiated treatment towards refugees, migrants and the diaspora. The diaspora has enough political agency and affluence while refugees have none. She mentioned that she came across a taxi driver from Pakistan in the US at the height of Trump's campaign against illegal migrants. She had asked how the taxi driver felt about it. He answered that the illegal migrants deserved it because he had struggled hard and come through the formal way and he did not want irregular migrants coming in. This illustrates that even within the migrant community, differentiation exists. Again inequality exists among migrants based on various aspects such as rural or urban background, education and country of origin. She believes that these examples drive home the point of politics behind the refugees. As an example of differentiated treatment, she mentioned that in many western countries, Syrian refugees were not welcomed, but the Ukrainian refugees were. In the same way Rohingya refugees were not welcomed in India. She added that though international frameworks are available in this regard, they are not implemented properly. Finally, she quoted the UN High Commissioner who had said about refugees that "no one becomes a refugee by choice, but the rest of us have a choice about how we want to help and how we want to treat them".

## Presentation 3

# Issues and Concerns of Labour Migrants: Nepal Scenario



### **Mahesh Raj Bhatta**

*Research Officer, Centre for South Asian Studies,  
Kathmandu*

In his presentation, **Mahesh Raj Bhatta** identified labour migration from South Asia as a significant phenomenon in the contemporary global landscape. He outlined how this trend presents both challenges and opportunities for the region and beyond. As millions of individuals seek employment opportunities abroad, often driven by economic necessity, they encounter various challenges that not only affect their lives but also impact the societies they leave behind.

Mr Bhatta's presentation delved into the contemporary challenges faced by labour migrants from South Asia, focusing on the socioeconomic, legal, and human rights dimensions of these challenges. He underscored the magnitude of migration within South Asia, highlighting the region as one of the largest migration corridors globally, with millions of people migrating both within and beyond the region.

He stressed the necessity for collective efforts from the region to address their common challenges, emphasising the importance of forums such as the present seminar in facilitating bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Mr Bhatta advocated for policy harmonisation, noting the disparities in migration policies and regulations among South Asian countries, which result in inconsistencies and pose challenges for the protection of migrant workers. He suggested that seminars and conferences like the present one provide an opportunity to harmonise national policies within a larger framework and establish common standards for labour protection.

Moreover, Mr Bhatta highlighted the role of such seminars and conferences in capacity-building and knowledge-sharing among multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organisations, and policymakers. He emphasised that these platforms serve as avenues for sharing best practices, innovative approaches, and lessons learnt from each other, thereby promoting capacity development.

Furthermore, Mr Bhatta underscored the importance of such seminars and conferences in advocating for the rights of South Asian labour migrants at national, regional, and global levels. He noted that countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal serve as major sources of labour migrants, particularly for the GCC and other Middle East countries. These migrants typically work in sectors such as construction, hospitality, healthcare, domestic work, and manufacturing. He reiterated the significance of seminars and conferences like the one being held to address the multifaceted challenges faced by South Asian labour migrants and advocate for their rights. He emphasised the need for continued dialogue, cooperation, and advocacy to address these challenges effectively and ensure the well-being and rights of migrant workers in the region and beyond.

In continuation of his speech, Mr Bhatta elaborated on the major destinations for South Asian migrant workers, particularly the Middle East and GCC countries, where employment opportunities abound due to booming economies and infrastructure development projects. He cited data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), highlighting the substantial South Asian diaspora worldwide, with India boasting the largest diaspora at nearly 18 million, followed by Bangladesh at 7 million and Pakistan at about 6 million, all ranking among the top ten largest diasporas globally. Mr Bhatta also acknowledged the significant contributions to the global workforce from other South Asian countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan.

Underscoring the economic significance of migration for the region, Mr Bhatta said that the remittance sent by the South Asian labour migrants constitute a substantial portion of the GDP of their home countries. He mentioned that besides the Middle East and GCC countries, other parts of the world such as the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea attract migrant workers due to their demand for labour, higher wages, better living standards, and economic opportunities.

Highlighting the importance of remittances to the South Asian economies, Mr Bhatta referred a World Bank study in 2022, which identified South Asia as one of the largest recipients of remittances globally. He noted that remittances often surpass foreign direct investment and official development assistance combined, with India standing out as the foremost recipient globally, reaching USD 83 billion in 2019, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, remittances in Nepal constituted over 25 per cent of its GDP, further illustrating the significant role of remittances in the region's economies.

Transitioning to the challenges faced by South Asian migrant workers, Mr Bhatta highlighted the pre-departure challenges they encounter, which often receive less attention. He emphasised the issues with recruitment agencies and mediators, who engage in faulty practices such as charging excessive fees and providing misleading information about employment opportunities, thus exploiting the vulnerabilities of prospective migrants. While focusing on socioeconomic challenges faced by labour migrants from South Asia, Mr Bhatta stressed on the precarious nature of their



employment. Many migrant workers find themselves working in low-skilled and informal sectors, lacking legal protections and facing exploitative working conditions. This vulnerability exposes them to various forms of abuse, including wage theft, unsafe working environments, and human trafficking. Additionally, migrants often encounter difficulties accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, and shelter in their host countries. Legal challenges further compound their difficulties, highlighting the need for comprehensive support mechanisms for South Asian migrant workers.

In the concluding part of his speech, Mr Bhatta addressed the numerous human rights violations experienced by migrant workers, particularly violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms. He highlighted the vulnerability of women and children migrants to exploitation and trafficking, emphasising the need for gender-sensitive approaches to migration governance and protection. Additionally, migrant workers often face discrimination and social exclusion based on nationality, ethnicity, and migrant status, which restricts their access to employment, housing, healthcare, and other social facilities. Mr Bhatta pointed out the inadequacy of social protection mechanisms for migrant workers, resulting in mental health issues and fatal diseases due to stress, anxiety, and trauma associated with migration, including separation from loved ones.

Mr Bhatta drew attention to the lack of documented data on migration from Nepal to India, particularly through forest regions. He highlighted health issues among migrant workers, with up to 70 per cent of them reportedly suffering from fatal diseases, including HIV/AIDS. He underscored the insufficient attention given by governments to address this aspect of migration. Moreover, Mr

Bhatta underscored the social costs of migration, citing increased divorce rates in Nepal as an evidence of the familial strains caused by migration, which, if not addressed, could lead to long-term consequences.

Mr Bhatta then shifted the focus to the economic implications of migration, noting the high dependence of South Asian economies on remittances. He raised concerns about the potential economic instability in host countries and its repercussions on South Asian economies, particularly in times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. He cited instances of migrant workers stranded at the India-Nepal border during the pandemic, highlighting the challenges faced by migrants in returning to their home countries despite open borders. Natural disasters, conflicts, and political instability further exacerbate the challenges faced by migrant workers, as seen in recent flooding in Dubai and the impact of global conflicts.

In conclusion, Mr Bhatta posed some major questions for consideration. One of the questions is; Are South Asian countries equipped to accommodate their sizable migrant worker populations during unforeseen crises? He reflected on the inadequacy of responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and raised concerns about the potential impact of reduced labour migration to the Middle East on both South Asian and host countries' economies and development. These questions underscored the urgent need for comprehensive policies and measures to address the multifaceted challenges faced by South Asian migrant workers and ensure their well-being, rights, and sustainable integration into both origin and destination societies.

## Presentation 4

# Labour Migration Governance: Perspective of Nepal



### Shishir Khanal

*Member of Parliament, Nepal*

At the outset of his deliberation, **Mr Shishir Khanal** underscored the importance of collectively addressing the challenges faced by South Asian migrants. Before delving into the heart of the discourse, Mr Khanal emphasised the profound impact of labour migration on the socio-economic fabric of South Asia. He traced the historical trend, noting Nepal's involvement in post-British India, where Nepali Gurkha soldiers were recruited, setting the precedence for migration. He highlighted that South Asia has become one of the largest sources of migrants globally, with approximately

40 million workers sent abroad, equivalent to the 38th largest country of the world by population.

Highlighting the significant role of remittances, Mr Khanal cited World Bank data indicating that South Asia received around USD 176 billion in remittances in 2022, comprising 28 per cent of the global remittance flow. He underscored the multifaceted nature of labour migration, encompassing both temporary and permanent movements within and beyond the region. The GCC countries, particularly, have emerged as prominent destinations for temporary migrant workers, predominantly male, in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic services.

Mr Khanal observed that this trend, initially set by India and Pakistan, has been embraced by other South Asian nations like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. In Nepal, he identified a similar trajectory unfolding since the late 1990s, driven by factors such as a decade-long civil war, inequality of opportunities, and the opening of employment opportunities abroad. He cited census data indicating that more than 2.1 million Nepali citizens reside outside their homeland, with an undercounted estimate suggesting up to 4 million Nepalese working abroad. Additionally, he mentioned over 1 million Nepalis are presumed to be working in India, although not reflected in national data due to the nature of the open border.

Mr Khanal then shed light on the profound impact of remittances on Nepalese households, with one in every three households receiving such financial support. He highlighted research by Nepal Rastra Bank indicating that households receiving remittances are less likely to fall into poverty,



showcasing the tangible benefits of migration on living standards. Moreover, he emphasised the broader impact of remittances on critical sectors such as education and health, catalysing investment and fostering positive changes in mindset towards education attainment. In times of crisis, Mr Khanal noted, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or natural disasters like earthquakes, remittances serve as a crucial lifeline for families, providing essential support. He then reiterated the importance of understanding and addressing the challenges faced by South Asian migrants, acknowledging the importance of collective efforts towards achieving meaningful solutions.

Mr Khanal then focused on the substantial contribution of remittances from Nepali migrants to the national GDP. In the fiscal year 2023 alone, remittance inflows amounted to a staggering USD 9.3 billion, representing 23 per cent of Nepal's GDP. Mr Khanal categorised migration from Nepal into three groups -regional migration to India, migration to GCC countries and Malaysia, and skilled labour migration to developed nations. While acknowledging the economic benefits of labour migration, he underscored the formidable challenges and concerns accompanying the migration process. Migrant workers often face exploitation by unregulated recruitment agencies and are burdened with fees and bonded labour. Their precarious employment leaves them vulnerable to economic shocks and exploitation, with limited investment in enhancing their skills for sustainable development upon their return.

Mr Khanal then outlined Nepal's policy framework aimed at ethical recruitment and protection of migrant workers' rights. However, he noted some persistent concerns, such as exorbitant fees charged to workers and deceptive practices in job recruitment. Moreover, migrant workers often

find themselves confined to low-skilled and hazardous jobs abroad, facing physical, mental, and psychological challenges. Mr Khanal highlighted the alarming number of deaths and injuries among Nepali workers abroad, including instances of chronic kidney disease due to harsh working conditions, particularly in the Gulf countries and Malaysia.

He argued that social dynamics in Nepal are also being affected by migration, with declining population growth rates and increased social fragmentation. Mr Khanal noted the shift from hill communities to flatlands and urban areas, resulting in population decline in mountainous districts. He underscored the importance of addressing these demographic shifts and their implications for social protection and economic challenges.

Mr Khanal concluded by emphasising the need for collective dialogue and policy initiatives to address the abovementioned multifaceted challenges of labour migration. He called for collaborative efforts both within the region and beyond, recognising the shared responsibility in ensuring the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

## Presentation 5

# Issues and Concerns of Labour Migrants: Perspective from Sri Lanka



### Colonel Nalin Herath

*Director General (acting), Institute of National Security Studies, Colombo*

In his deliberation, **Colonel Nalin Herath** mainly focused on the effects of labour migration in South Asia and Sri Lanka. He started with discussion on some aspects of labour migration from Sri Lanka. First, he discussed remittance inflows. He identified the Middle East and Korea as important sources of remittance for Sri Lanka. In addition to enhancing household incomes and elevating living standards, these remittances are an essential component in the process of bolstering the economy of Sri Lanka. The second aspect that he emphasised was the influence that migration had

on employment opportunities. In this regard, he claimed that South Asia is a big destination for migrant workers from Sri Lanka. Thus, international migration creates employment opportunities for Sri Lankans in a variety of fields, including construction, domestic work, manufacturing, and service and hospitality industries.

Colonel Herath, then, highlighted the social cost of migration from the perspective of Sri Lanka. He acknowledged that labour migration has the potential to bring social changes inside Sri Lankan families and communities. In this regard, he stated that remittances are a significant contributor to the increase in household incomes. On the other hand, he argued, migration can also result in the separation of family members, which can have an impact on the dynamics of families and the structures of communities. Then, he discussed the concern related to the issue of “Brain Drain”. According to him, there are concerns about the potential brain drain effect resulting from migration of skilled workers from Sri Lanka. This could lead to skill shortages in key sectors of the Sri Lankan economy, hindering long-term development prospects.

He also highlighted various policies and initiatives that the Sri Lankan government took to manage labour migration effectively, including bilateral agreements with destination countries, pre-departure training programs for migrant workers, and support services for migrant workers and their families. Afterwards, he discussed the legal and ethical issues related to labour migration. According to him, labour migration from Sri Lanka to other countries raises legal and ethical



challenges related to the protection of migrant workers' rights including issues such as labour exploitation, human trafficking, and access to legal resources in the case of disputes and abuses. He then shed light on the contributions of diasporas. According to him, Sri Lankan migrant communities in South Asia and other countries play a significant role in fostering cultural exchange, promoting trade, and supporting development initiatives through investments and philanthropic activities in their home country.

Colonel Herath, then, briefly discussed the Safe Labour Migration Programme in Sri Lanka. This is a programme of ILO which contributes to promote safe and regular migration through improved policies and legal frameworks related to labour migration and better service provision to migrant workers and their families. He also informed that throughout this programme, ILO engaged with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment and other stakeholders to develop a code of ethical conduct for recruitment agents and sensitize the majority of the licensed foreign recruitment agents and develop safe migration information dissemination tools. Then he highlighted another initiative that the Sri Lankan government adopted - the National Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force (NAHTTF) which plays a key role to prevent human trafficking from Sri Lanka. Then, he discussed about Sri Lanka's National Policy and Action Plan on Migration for Employment 2023-2027 as the guiding document for the foreign employment sector in the country for the next five years.

He, then, moved on to the discussion about recent trends in labour migration. He pointed out the trend of how the present economic crisis has led to an upsurge of labour migration from Sri Lanka. Then, he identified another trend that is related to gender dimension of labour migration.

He underscored that the number of male migrant workers have increased more compared to the female labour migrants. He identified the government regulations which make it mandatory for women to obtain family background reports prior to migration as one of the reasons for decline in female migration. Also, according to government regulation, women should be older than 21 years of age if they want to migrate. Married women who have children under 5 years of age will also not be recommended for migration and those who have children older than 5 years of age should put in place satisfactory plans for child care. He opined that these regulations have contributed to gradual decline in female migration from Sri Lanka. He referred to the report of Foreign Employment Bureau 2021, where it was shown that the female migration was 63.92 per cent of total migration in 1990 and the percentage decreased to 33.6 per cent in 2021. Compared to female migration, male migration increased reaching to 66.34 per cent of total migration in 2021. Then, he showed how, in Sri Lanka, the number of low-skilled migrant workers gradually decreased. He argued that although the increase in the professional category is a positive indicator, it is also a sign of brain drain which has been exacerbated by deterioration of the socio-economic environment caused by the outbreak of pandemic.

He concluded his deliberation by saying that labour migration presents both opportunities and challenges. While it offers the potential for economic growth and poverty reduction, it also raises concerns about exploitation and inequality. According to him, concerted efforts are required from government and society as well as from international organisations to ensure safe, fair and beneficial labour migration.



## OPEN DISCUSSION



### **Professor Ishrat Shamim**

*President and Consultant, Centre for Women and Children's Studies*

Professor Ishrat Shamim raised a poignant question concerning the phenomenon of declining population in Nepal. Drawing a comparative analysis, Professor Ishrat contrasted this event with Bangladesh's experience, highlighting the notable increase in migration of both men and women in recent years. Her query underscored the complexity of demographic dynamics which also invited further exploration into the factors influencing population trends.

### **Dr Mohammad Nurul Islam**

*Specialist, Ministry of Finance*

Dr Mohammad Nurul Islam shared his observation about the predominant theme of migrant worker exploitation, citing instances of unethical recruitment practices, unreasonably high migration costs, and the absence of legal support in host countries. While acknowledging the discourse on certain issues like health, mortality rates, skill development, bonded labor, and wage disparities, he emphasised the critical need for a systematic and seamless recruitment process. He quoted Mr Sharif that it is a procedure where Bangladesh has a long-standing history of over 50 years but still lacks coherence. Dr Islam concluded with a resounding call for a comprehensive approach, urging the identification of responsibilities among stakeholders and advocating for a holistic implementation strategy to ensure orderly and responsible migration practices.





### **Rahnuma Salam Khan**

*National Project on Migration, Representative of ILO*

Rahnuma Salam Khan highlighted the absence of a national and regional consensus on minimum standards for overseas employment and labor migration, despite the existence of platforms like the Colombo Process. Emphasising the importance of establishing such standards, including minimum wage, social protection and standard working hours, Ms Khan underscored their potential to strengthen the bargaining power of origin countries during negotiation with destination countries. Ms Khan echoed Dr Nurul Islam's call for an extensive repairing and reformation of the recruitment process of Bangladesh. She expressed her disappointment about the current state where recruitment agencies primarily engage in visa processing rather than genuine recruitment. Later she outlined ILO's long standing support for labor migration and reform in policy making while stressing the need for full implementation to ensure fair recruitment practices. In the end, she advocated for the inclusion of reintegration measures in the migration cycle that shall facilitate sustainable livelihood improvements for migrant workers.

### **Professor Begum Touheeda Faruki**

*Former Director General, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs*

Professor Begum Touheeda Faruki pointed out that origin countries should not feel inferior compared to destination countries since migration brings mutual benefits for both parties. She advocated for a firm governmental stance that prioritises labor rights and ensures clear, favorable policies to empower workers in negotiations with employers. Highlighting the necessity of proper training Prof. Faruki vouched for laborers to enhance their bargaining capacity and secure fair wages. She called for careful observation to address the wage disparity of laborers. Ms Faruki also expressed concerns regarding the 'brain drain' phenomenon.





### **Salauddin Ahmed**

*Former member of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission*

Mr Salauddin Ahmed referred to the information provided by Colonerl Nalin Herath that 11 per cent of Nepalese migrants committed suicide. He then wondered whether such figure is available for Bangladesh as well. He emphasised that if extent of suicide during working abroad or after returning can be determined, definite directives might be identified. Concerned stakeholders would have particular duties to deliver in that case.

### **Sumaiya Islam**

*Executive director, Bangladesh Nari Sromik Kendro*

Sumaiya Islam stated that female migrant workers usually work as domestic workers and unfortunately, there is a lack of effort to develop any other sectors for women to work in. This is true for Bangladesh as well as for India and Sri Lanka. She added that Female migrant workers face a significant obstacle due to their age. Therefore, they cannot work without the permission of the guardian, which is often either their husband or father. Additionally, for women, there is lack of respect, recognition, and remuneration both in domestic and public sectors. Ms Islam then asked how the recruitment system can ensure recognition, respect, and remuneration for all migrant workers.





**Nazia Haidar**

*National Program Officer, Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh*

Ms Nazia Haidar asked about the state of digitalisation in the region's labour migration governance. She stated that the challenges are well known in Bangladesh, but she is interested to learn about how other countries use digital tools in migration governance and what challenges do they face in this regard. She also asked whether the speakers could see a role for artificial intelligence and deep machine learning.

## RESPONSE BY THE PANELISTS



### Colonel Nalin Herath

Colonel Herath began his response by arguing that although we cannot stop the freedom of migration or the freedom of movement, there should be a regulatory mechanism for labour migration. Drawing on the example of Sri Lanka, he said that the age limit of migration for female migrants is between 22 and 27. He argued that an 18-year-old female and a 22-year-old female will have different experiences in terms of migration.

He then pointed out that digitalisation is an issue that needs to be addressed. He argued that if digitalisation is introduced in labour governance, strict cyber protection mechanism needs to be ensured. Otherwise, anyone might be able to obtain relevant and sensitive information regarding the migrants and create a volatile situation in the community.

### Shishir Khanal

Mr Shishir Khanal briefly touched upon the topic of digitalisation particularly from Nepal's perspective. He stated that in Nepal there is not a significant use of digital technology to support or facilitate the migration process. Nepal's government uses digital services to provide the labour certificate which is needed at the immigration, making the process fairly easier. There are also additional discussions about using technology which is used particularly during the migration cycle. A lack of orientation is one of the key issues. The migrants are not aware of their whereabouts or what services are at their disposal.



He further noted that most migrants come from rural community and their level of education and skill is low which creates challenge in labour migration governance. Access to technology and use of AI and deep machine learning is very challenging from that perspective. He added that AI and

deep machine learning are creating further challenges for unskilled labour migrants since routine and manual jobs are at the risk of being taken over by the AI. The speaker sees this as a challenge for countries like Nepal where almost 25 per cent of the GDP is coming from remittances.

Mr Khanal concluded by saying that this puts political leaders such as himself and other stakeholders to figure out a way to develop their country so that they can provide better and safe employment to their people in their own country instead of sending them abroad.



### **Mahesh Raj Bhatta**

Mr Mahesh Raj Bhatta stated that in Nepal almost 1500-2000 people migrate on a daily basis. Hence the migrant population is increasing. He believes that digitalisation has a negative aspect in terms of labour migration. The migrant population along with their families have devices, but they are not well trained and are often unaware of the social media's impact. They often post news, information and videos on social media and it has consequences. Before Nepal banned tiktok, migrants spent their hard earned money sending gifts to unknown people, which created quite an uproar. They spent a lot of money only to enjoy the platform and not considering the consequences, which

he deemed to be a negative impact of technology.

### **Shariful Islam Hasan**

During his response, Shariful Islam Hasan suggested that instead of prioritising higher education only, the government should focus on vocational training also. He then expressed appreciation to the Nepali parliament member's willingness to address the issues of labour migration in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. He stated that those countries would not be able to run their country without the workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and they are not taking in migrants as a favour to the latter. If all the stakeholders can come together, and work together, the countries will be able to protect the migrants. He concluded his remarks by



saying that the recipient countries mirror the behaviour of the sender nations, hence the migrant origin countries should treat their people, particularly migrants well.



### Dr Mallika Joseph

In her response, Dr Mallika Joseph pointed out that the South Asian region has great bargaining power and being a demographically young region , it needs to focus on reducing the informality within sectors so that people who have papers have protection,.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS BY THE CHAIR



### Dr Tasneem Siddiqui

*Professor, Department of Political Science,  
University of Dhaka and Founding Chair of Refugee  
and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)*

**Dr Tasneem Siddiqui** identified a few important issues from the discussion in the first working session and stated that these issues require further discussion. While wrapping up the session, she said that various aspects of migration had been covered in the discussion such as gender issues, rights issues and protection issues. She also endorsed that experiences of various South Asian countries have been highlighted during the discussion.

The Chair of the session then highlighted the issues that appeared to be important to her. The first issue was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the trend of migration. When the pandemic struck, labour migration went down significantly. However, following the end of the pandemic, labour migration saw a sharp rise. In 2022, there was an 84 per cent rise in migration from India. For Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, the rate of increase in migration was 89 per cent, 84 per cent and 184 per cent respectively. This, according to her, indicates that there is a demand for labour abroad. This demand may reduce in extraordinary situations, but again it picks up. However, the challenge of migration is that while the number of migrants is increasing, the job salaries and migrants' rights are not in a condition which can be considered as a win-win situation for migrants, the sending and the receiving countries. Again, while the number of migrants are increasing, remittances in general are not increasing the way they should. According to Dr Siddiqui, a distinct trend can be identified after seeing the total remittance from the figures that the presenters have come up with. South Asia is the biggest remittance receiver region in Asia, where the highest amount of remittances are received. Thirty nine per cent of the remittances that come to Asia are received in South Asian countries while the share of Southeast Asia and East Asia are 24 per cent and 19 per cent respectively. However, the growth rate of remittance is on decline and it has created a challenge for the remittance receiving countries.

The second thing she highlighted from the discussions was the policy issues. The panelists have discussed migration, challenges related to migration and country experiences. In general, these issues are dealt with by the countries of origin and destination countries bilaterally. In the multilateral



forums, specially in South Asia, the countries have so far failed to take a common stand like the OPEC countries did. She said that the OPEC countries are increasing the price of oil unitedly. She believes that there is a great opportunity to do the same in the case of labour migration from South Asia. But instead, the countries compete with each other. The unhealthy competition creates a situation where the migrants rights are ignored. The countries ignore to look at the broader picture, she commented. She further highlighted that the right-based documents such as the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families have been kept in the back seat. Now people hear more about the Global Compact on Migration, a compact where the interest of countries of destination is more protected and which is more about regulations than the rights of the migrants. In her opinion, in terms of the rights of the migrants, internationally the discussion is going backwards because the origin countries are not united. That is why the destination countries can change rights and protection-related laws.

She also talked about climate change. According to her, the issue of climate change cannot be sidelined when labour migration is discussed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were multiple research works which showed that climate change affected migration to a certain level. Previously it was thought that it is mostly internal migration that is impacted by climate change, but in a research on more than 6000 households, it was found that 34 per cent of the international labour migrants have come from climate hot-spots. These migrants were in a situation that is twice as hard because they used international migration as an adaptation tool to climate change. Therefore, when they come back to their country of origin, their adaptation struggle is more challenging than others, since they have to adapt to different societies as well as climate change. This is why

in the global fora on migration and development, there is more discussion on climate change. She emphasised that such discussion should take place at domestic level too.

And lastly, she requested everyone not to use the term 'illegal migrants' because a human being cannot be illegal. The process by which he or she has migrated could be irregular. She said that people should appreciate using the term irregular migration which is globally recognised. The other things she noted was how the type of work that migrants do in destination countries is referred to. Even when the work is in a very bad situation it should not be called – 3D work (Dirty, dangerous, difficult). Work is always respectable, whatever work people are doing, it should be respected. The last thing she reminded the audience was to not calling labour migration as manpower or labour export. She said she would like to curtail the term manpower; rather she encourages the term human resource which is more dignified, and more respectable. Finally, she thanked the organisers, the Chief Guest and the audience for making the session very lively.



## WORKING SESSION II: REGIONAL COOPERATION IN LABOUR MIGRATION FROM SOUTH ASIA

### Presentation 1

### Regional Cooperation in Labour Migration From South Asia: An Assessment



#### Dr Benuka Ferdousi

*Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)*

At the outset of her presentation, **Dr Benuka Ferdousi** noted that historically, migration governance was left to the sovereign control of individual national states. The idea of governing migration through cooperation among states is a new one. After the World War II, to cope with the huge movements of displaced people in Europe, a formal refugee regime was established based upon the 1951 Convention which is overseen by a UN agency, named UNHCR.

Dr Ferdousi further observed that though refugee governance started to be operated at multilateral level with a clear UN mandate and through a designated UN agency, other aspects of migration, including labour migration, remained within the domain of nation state's sovereign control. According to scholars, polarisation between the migrant-origin and destination countries was to blame for the decades-long failure in establishing an international regime on migration. Reluctance of destination countries in such arrangements, arising from abundant supply of labour and lack of reciprocity were the main obstacles in bringing the migration into the UN.

She argued that in absence of a 'top-down' multilateral framework, a 'bottom-up' framework began to emerge in global migration governance which was mainly led by Regional Consultative Process (RCPs). The first RCP was created in Europe in 1984. Since then, these processes have multiplied in various regions of the world – Africa, Asia, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean. RCPs played a significant role in the UN's journey towards adopting a Global Compact on Migration in

2018. Even after the GCM came into being, cooperation in global migration governance is still led by the RCPs and the GCM is yet to replace the RCP led model of cooperation.

Then she identified some unique features of RCPs. The informal setting and regular and repeated meetings of RCPs make them congenial for trust building. These non-binding fora bring together representatives of states, civil society and international organisations at the regional level to discuss migration-related issues in a cooperative manner. They focus on cooperative dialogue with an emphasis on information exchange and technical cooperation. They contribute to shaping national migration policies and to the convergence of policy at the regional level. Also, they act as “laboratories” for piloting regional migration initiatives.

In the global context mentioned above, she examined the regional cooperation in migration in South Asia. She started with SAARC and said that during the 18th SAARC summit in Kathmandu in 2014, there was an attempt to reinvigorate SAARC’s regional cooperation which was reflected in the Kathmandu Declaration. Kathmandu Declaration endorsed migration as an agenda of SAARC which was followed by SAARC Declaration on labour migration in 2016. The Declaration put forward a number of suggestions such as developing a South Asian qualification reference framework, formulation of Standard Employment Contract and Minimum Wages, taking common position on minimum wages, formulating guidelines/regional framework on ‘fair and ethical recruitment’, taking joint initiatives to gradually ensure migration free of cost, facilitating SAARC country migrant workers for access to justice and free legal assistance and support in the destination countries. These suggestions, if implemented, could go a long way to solve the concerns and issues of South Asian labour migrants. This, however, did not happen since after the Kathmandu Summit, progress of SAARC was halted and the auspicious plans were buried henceforth.

Dr Ferdousi, then, argued that given the global experience, it was not surprising that in absence of an effective regional body, the cooperation efforts of South Asian labour sending countries channeled through RCPs, most important of which are the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. In 2003, in response to calls from ten Asian migrant origin countries – five from South Asia (namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and five from Southeast Asia (namely, Indonesia, China, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) together with the Government of Sri Lanka, organised a ministerial consultation of countries of origin in Asia in April 2003 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This later came to be known as the Colombo Process.

She informed that Colombo Process works on five Thematic Areas - Skills and Qualification Recognition, Ethical Recruitment, Pre-departure Orientation, Remittances and Labor Market Analysis. IOM serves as its secretariat. Besides sharing of good practices, data and information through regular dialogue among the Asian origin countries, Colombo process did a number of commendable jobs which included development and implementation of comprehensive training and carrying out a number of policy studies on the five thematic areas of the process.



She observed that in recent years, the Colombo process countries formulated a four-year work plan to further the goals of transforming the recruitment industry from the employee-pay model to an employer-pay model; achieving zero cost migration, bringing the informal recruitment actors under the regulatory framework; and equipping migrant workers with necessary information. The five thematic area working groups meet regularly to discuss the implementation progress of such plans as well as to discuss contemporary concerns of labour migrants. For example, in the post-Covid years, discussion is going on about how the governments of the origin countries and other stakeholders can cooperate to set out a concrete policy framework against wage theft, a phenomenon observed during the pandemic years.

She then elaborated on Abu Dhabi Dialogue. She first described how the Dialogue was formed. Recognising that addressing the concerns of labour migrants requires bringing together both origin and destination countries, a new consultation process was created in 2008 which, along with the members of Colombo Process, includes six destination countries - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The new consultation was named as Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD), the permanent secretariat of which is located in the UAE. Besides consultation among labour sending and destination countries, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue emphasis on concrete action. In 2017, four key areas were selected for pilot projects to be conducted by the ADD. Those are - ethical recruitment, skills certification, information and orientation programming, and the role of technology in the governance of labour mobility. Thereafter, a number of pilot projects are being run under the auspices of the ADD.

Dr Ferdousi then focused on the participation of Bangladesh in the regional cooperation including the RCPs. She mentioned that Bangladesh is an active participant in all five thematic areas of Colombo process - Skills and Qualification Recognition, Ethical Recruitment, Pre-departure Orientation, Remittances and Labor Market Analysis. With support from UN bodies like IOM and ILO, the country has conducted a number of policy studies on issues like remittance and labour market analysis. It has launched an improved pre- departure orientation training with more than 100 training centres and the orientation program goes through upgradation from time to time.

She then explained Bangladesh's multifaceted efforts to ensure ethical recruitment. Bangladesh has placed caps on migration cost for different destinations through bilateral labour migration agreements with 16 countries. The country also revised its Overseas Employment and Migrants Act in 2023 to bring recruitment intermediaries such as sub-agents into regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, with the support of IOM and ILO, the country has rolled out a project named Recruiting Agents' Information Management System (RAIMS) in 2021. Through RAIMS, prospective migrant workers gain access to accurate information on available recruitment agencies which protect them from fraudulent brokers. Since its inauguration, over 1,300 recruitment entities have registered to the platform and the Bangladeshi Government expects to see all agencies register by 2024. In ADD also, Bangladesh plays an active role through discussions and participation in projects undertaken.

Dr Ferdousi then focused on the region's achievement in regional cooperation on labour migration. She opined that in the case of regional cooperation in migration in South Asia, RCPs are playing a significant role in the sense that it keeps the regional cooperation moving against the background of failure of regional bodies in taking up the issue. She added that despite being non-binding



informal fora, RCPs in South Asia have been showing incremental progress over a long period and it seems to continue until global formal mechanisms such as GCM and regional bodies show a breakthrough in this regard.

She then identified some challenges of South Asian regional cooperation on labour migration. She said that lack of resources remain to be a challenge in furthering regional cooperation through RCPs. The Colombo process, for example, still lacks a permanent secretariat which is a major limitation of the process. The meetings of thematic groups are funded by the Governance of Labour Migration in South and Southeast Asia (GOALS) Programme, a joint programme implemented by IOM, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women, with financial assistance from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The absence of financial contributions from the participant countries in the forum could potentially undermine the participants' sense of ownership.

Second major obstacle identified by Dr Ferdousi was lack of trust among the South Asian countries which, she argued, is hampering regional cooperation in every sector – trade, energy or even climate change. She added that in the case of labour migration, this lack of trust is reflected through the competition among origin countries which reduces their collective bargaining power. According to her, the third major obstacle is the non-binding nature of RCPs which limits its capacity, particularly in negotiation on rights issues. She referred to the Kafala system in this regard.

Finally, she made some suggestions to advance South Asian regional cooperation on labour migration. She suggested continuing with the RCPs while at the same time taking efforts to integrate migration in regional bodies. She also called for activating global mechanisms on migration to address the concerns of the migrants from South Asia and beyond.

## Presentation 2

# Cooperation in Labour Migration: Perspective of Sri Lanka



### Sugeeswara Sinadhira

*Advisor, The Prime Minister's Office, Sri Lanka, Colombo*

In his address, **Mr Sugeeswara Sinadhira**, Advisor at the Prime Minister's Office in Colombo, highlighted the significant role of the South Asian region as a primary source of international migrants, particularly to destinations such as the Middle East, South-East Asia, Europe, and North America. Citing estimates from the World Bank, he noted that a majority of the 38 million South Asians worldwide are labour migrants.

Mr Senadhira provided a historical overview, noting that in the first decade after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, migration was primarily limited to professionals seeking economic opportunities in the United Kingdom. The official adoption of Sinhala as the language in 1956 prompted a substantial migration of the Dutch, Portuguese, and Anglo communities, known as Ceylonese Burghers, to Australia. He further explained that the dismantling of quota systems and discriminatory rules in countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia in the 1960s opened up new opportunities and led to increased labour migration from South Asia.

The 1970s oil price boom further fuelled migration, bringing large numbers of contract workers to the Middle East for infrastructure and development projects. Mr Senadhira noted that international migration from the region continued to increase in the 1980s, with destinations such as North America, Australia, and the oil economies in the GCC becoming major hubs. He highlighted the changing profile of migrants over time, noting a shift from predominantly male, low-skilled labourers in the 1970s to a more diverse workforce, including semi-skilled or skilled workers.

Since the 1990s, rising demand for domestic workers in the Middle East and Asia has significantly increased the number of migrant women, with women accounting for more than 50 per cent of emigrants from Sri Lanka. Mr Senadhira provided statistics on labour migration from five South Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal, ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 annually between 2012 and 2017.

He also discussed recent migration trends from Sri Lanka, citing a sudden increase in skilled and unskilled workers leaving for foreign employment. Mr Senadhira attributed this surge to incentives offered by the Sri Lankan government, including a two-year no-pay leave for public sector employees to pursue foreign employment while retaining seniority upon their return. Additionally, he noted a shift in migration patterns due to the Gaza-Israel conflict, with many displaced Sri Lankan workers seeking employment opportunities in Israel amidst the departure of Palestinian workers.

Mr Senadhira highlighted the numerous challenges of labour migration and stressed the critical importance of regional cooperation and partnerships in addressing these issues. A key challenge identified by him is the need for accurate and reliable statistics on labour migration. While data can be sourced from various channels such as Labour Force Surveys (LFS), population censuses, and administrative records, each source has its limitations. He pointed out that Labour Force Surveys in South Asian countries often overlook vital questions related to migration, including nationality, birthplace, previous residence, and household members abroad. Similarly, population censuses frequently lack crucial information on international migration and migrant workers, such as the location of household members abroad and details of return migration.

Administrative records maintained by government agencies, including the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment and Foreign Employment Bureau in Sri Lanka, are crucial sources of international labour migration statistics. However, Mr Senadhira noted a significant drawback. This drawback is the transient nature of migrant workers, who frequently shift between locations and countries, making it challenging to maintain accurate records. Additionally, he highlighted instances where migrants enter countries on tourist visas but end up working illegally, overstaying their visas without permission.



Mr Senadhira cited recent discussions between Korea and Sri Lanka, revealing that a significant proportion of Sri Lankan workers had not returned home after the expiration of their work permits, with some continuing to work illegally in different sectors. He also noted that the data coverage in South Asian countries is hampered by definitional constraints, varying methodologies, and inconsistencies in data collection practices.

Despite the establishment of an international legal definition of migrant workers by the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, Mr Senadhira highlighted disparities in how different countries identify international migrants and migrant workers. These variations, including differences in minimum durations of residence, pose challenges for comparing labour migration statistics across South Asian countries. Consequently, he called for collective action by South Asian nations to address these challenges and enhance data quality and comparability in the region.

Mr Senadhira emphasised the pressing need for regional cooperation in light of recent incidents highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers. He recounted a harrowing incident in December 2023, where a group of Sri Lankans fell victim to illegal trafficking to Myanmar, being enticed by promises of lucrative employment opportunities in the Information Technology (IT) sector. Tragically, they were coerced into working on international cyber operations in hideouts controlled by a terrorist group, highlighting the grim reality of human trafficking and exploitation.

Efforts to rescue the victims were met with challenges, as the Myanmar authorities claimed no access to the cyber camps due to their location in terrorist-controlled areas. Despite these obstacles, eight victims, comprising six males and two females, were eventually rescued during military operations and repatriated with the assistance of the Sri Lankan Embassy. However, alarming reports indicated that 46 more Sri Lankans remained trapped in the cyber camps, enduring exploitation as cyber slaves.

Mr Senadhira underscored the urgent need for initiatives to address the socio-economic challenges faced by returning migrant workers, aspirant migrants, and victims of human trafficking. He highlighted the role of rapid socio-economic changes in exacerbating vulnerabilities to irregular migration and trafficking, exacerbated by a lack of awareness of safe migration pathways and national qualification frameworks. Upon returning to Sri Lanka, many workers encounter difficulties in integrating due to skills and qualification mismatches, hindering their prospects for decent employment opportunities.

In response to these challenges, the Government of Sri Lanka launched a four-year project and action plan focusing on migration for employment, alongside a national strategic action plan to combat human trafficking. Mr Senadhira noted the collaborative efforts involving assistance from Japan, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment. Finally, he lauded Japan's support in protecting and uplifting Sri Lankan migrant workers.

## Presentation 3

# Cooperation in Labour Migration: A Destination Country Perspective



### Hernaikh Singh

*Deputy Director, Institute of South Asian Studies,  
National University of Singapore*

**Mr Hernaikh Singh**, in his presentation, discussed the issues of labour migration in Singapore which is a significant destination for South Asian labour migrants. At the outset, he talked about the composition of Singapore's workforce. More than 1.5 million foreign workers were employed in Singapore in 2023 which was almost 30 per cent of the total population of Singapore. Among them, around 280,000 were migrant domestic workers, and others were employed in construction, marine shipyards, and other sectors in Singapore. Thus, Singapore is the home to a sizable population who are

either labour migrants or workers coming from other countries.

Then, he highlighted that due to the outbreak of COVID-19 migration flow to Singapore decreased significantly. During the year 2021, it decreased from 1.4 million to 1.2 million. However, immediately following COVID-19 and the recovery of the Singapore economy, as well as the relaxing of the borders, the number of migrant workers in Singapore increased to 1.5 million. He highlighted that the labour migrants in Singapore, along with the people of Singapore have been residing there for a very long time. In this connection, he shared his experience in living in Little India for 20 years. He informed that his interaction with the foreign workers was quite intensive, since he used to meet those foreign workers every weekend. According to him, interacting with the foreign workers is of great assistance to have a good understanding of their requirements and needs. He added that Singaporean society permits foreign workers to coexist in the society without having a great deal of knowledge about them.

While highlighting the challenges of the labour migrants in Singapore, he discussed two major incidents that reflected the challenges. The first incident was the outbreak of the Little India riots. On December 8th, 2013, over 300 migrant labourers participated in a riot that lasted for almost two hours. The violence occurred at the intersection of Race Course Road and Hampshire Road in Little India, Singapore. The riot occurred soon after the death of an Indian construction worker in a road accident. The Singaporean bus driver, who caused the fatal accident was found not guilty. According

to the investigation report, the victim was drunk and tried to get on the private bus that was thought to be taking foreign workers to the Avery Lodge dorm. The bus driver asked a female time-keeper from the Singapore School Transport Association, who was in charge of making transportation plans, to help get the victim off the bus because he was making a mess. The accident happened soon after the victim got off the bus. Although the riot was brought under control in approximately 2 hours, the Little India riot brought to surface the existing disharmony between migrant workers and the Singapore state.. And Mr Singh pointed out that migrants who were involved in vandalising vehicles in the street did not cause any damage to the shops and buildings. That proved that the angst was actually towards the state rather than the people of Singapore. In response to the unrest, the government implemented the Liquor Control Supply and Consumption Act in 2015, aiming to prohibit the selling of alcohol. Subsequently, proper bus terminals were also built in areas frequently visited by migrant workers during their days off, particularly on Sundays, to prevent similar accidents from occurring.

Another incident Mr Singh discussed is related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the migrant workers live in dormitories, especially adjacent to the construction industry. Their dormitories are primarily located on the outskirts of Singapore or in close proximity to their workplaces. These dormitories are densely populated, with approximately 12 to 20 workers occupying each room. The rooms have inadequate ventilation. The limited space in those dorms had an immediate adverse effect following the start of the pandemic. The first few cases of COVID-19 infections among migrant workers were recorded in February 2020, in which five Bangladeshi workers caught the virus in the initial phases. However, at that time, the Singapore government did not, unfortunately, calculate plausible infection rates in worker's dormitories. For that reason, the high infection rates among foreign workers led to the emergence of a global, social and moral critique. Hence, there was an allegation against the Singapore government for marginalisation and ill treatment of its foreign workers. However, the Singapore government quickly addressed those issues and took various initiatives to reduce further infection. New recovery facilities were also established by converting military camps and exhibition centres into isolation centres. Besides, the government focused on ensuring the future safety of migrant communities. As part of this, the coverage of Foreign Employee Dormitory Act was extended. The increase in the number of dormitories from 53 to 1500 necessitated compliance with the regulatory criteria, ensuring that employers do not compromise on safety and cleanliness to cut expenses.

By explaining those two events and Singapore government's response against those two events, Mr Singh commented that it is conceivable for such measures to be implemented in Singapore. This is due to the fact that Singapore is a small country that is open and transparent, has a strong adherence to regulations, and has a society that is civic conscious. However, he was concerned that other nations that receive labour migrants might not be able to handle situations like the one that the government of Singapore did about labour migrants. Hence, he suggested a multifaceted approach that the labour recipient countries need to think of which encompasses policy interventions, legal reforms and social initiatives. First, the governments in both the sending and receiving countries must work



together for ensuring labour standards and support services to the migrants. In addition, there should be extra efforts made to foster social inclusion and cultural integration. Some examples of these efforts include the provision of language instruction and community assistance programmes. Second, it is imperative to emphasise the importance of international collaboration in tackling the fundamental factors that drive migration, such as poverty, inequality, and limited prospects in the countries of origin. In this case, by making substantial investments in education and skill enhancement, governments can foster an environment that allows individuals to flourish in their home countries as well.

Furthermore, regional cooperation and partnership are essential for addressing the challenges faced by South Asian labour migrants. By working together, countries in the region can develop comprehensive strategies. Many initiatives can be taken to protect the rights and well being of migrants, improve labour standards and promote social inclusion. According to him, one of the policies could be harmonisation of policies and regulations. The South Asian countries must collaborate to harmonise their migration policies and regulations to ensure consistency and coherence. Secondly, information sharing and capacity building has to be emphasised. Regional cooperation can facilitate the exchange of information and best practices among the South Asian countries. These include sharing data on migration trends, labour market demands and scale requirements. And thirdly, regional dialogues and advocacy are important. For that, regional forums and platforms can be established for further dialogue and advocacy on migrant rights and protection. These include engaging with regional organisations. However, he stated that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which could have been ideal in this respect, is stagnant. Hence, the South Asian countries need to devise appropriate platforms

that will help raising awareness. Lastly, social protection and welfare measures can be included in the regional cooperation to provide support to the migrants and their families. This includes establishing regional mechanisms for accessing healthcare, education and social assistance. Then, he highlighted the issue of migrants' legal status. Although many of these initiatives are easier said than done, this is due to a combination of structural, political, economic and social factors that create barriers to effective actions.

Mr Singh then underscored several issues that make implementation of these measures challenging. First issue is complexity in migration that arises due to various migration patterns. South Asian migration is characterised by diverse and complex patterns including both internal and international migration as well as temporary and permanent movements. This complexity makes it difficult to devise one-size-fits-all solutions. Second challenge is fragmented governance and coordination. In South Asia, migration governance is often fragmented featuring multiple government agencies. And stakeholders involved in various aspects of migration management lack coordination and collaboration among themselves.. These hinder the development and implementation of coherent policies and programs to address migration challenges effectively. Third challenge is limited resources and capacity. Many South Asian countries face resource constraints and capacity challenges in managing migration. Hence, limited financial resources, institutional capacity and technical expertise can impede efforts to develop and implement comprehensive migration policies and programs. Fourth challenge is a lack of legal and policy frameworks. Countries lack robust legal and policy frameworks to protect migrants' rights and regulate migration laws. In this regard, outdated laws and inadequate enforcement mechanisms can leave the migrants vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and discrimination. Fifth challenge emanates from the informal economy and irregular migration. A considerable proportion of South Asian labour migration occurs through informal channels and irregular pathways. Bypassing formal regulatory mechanisms, irregular migration undermines efforts to protect migrants' rights and enforce labour standards as migrants are working in the informal economy that are often excluded from legal protections and social benefits. Final challenge is global economic and political dynamics. South Asian migration is influenced by global economic and political dynamics, including economic recession, geopolitical tensions and changes in migration policies of destination countries. These external factors can exacerbate migrants' vulnerabilities and complicate efforts to address their challenges at the regional level.

In conclusion, Mr Singh stated that South Asian labour migrants face a range of challenges that stem from economic, social and legal factors, among others. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from government, civil society organisations and the international community to protect their rights. Regional cooperation and partnerships are crucial to addressing the challenges faced by South Asian labour migrants. While such efforts are not easy to implement, concerted efforts and collective action by the South Asian countries and the recipient countries are necessary to create a more inclusive and sustainable migration system that protects the rights of the labour migrants.

## Presentation 4

# Labour Migration: A Case Study of Kerala



### Anu Maria Joseph

*Research Associate, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru*

The presentation of **Ms Anu Maria Joseph**, was based on a case study of Kerala, a state in southern India. In the beginning, she presented the migration profile of Kerala which is the ninth-largest economy in India. She informed the audience that labour migration from Kerala commenced in the 1970s, spurred by the oil boom in the Middle East, with major destinations including GCC countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. According to the Kerala Migration Survey in 2020, approximately 2.12 million immigrants from Kerala reside abroad, constituting nearly 6 per cent of the state's total population. Remittances to Kerala have seen a substantial increase over the years, contributing significantly to the state's GDP, accounting for 30 per cent of its economy. Ms Joseph highlighted the diverse profile of migrant workers from Kerala, influenced by factors such as age, class, gender, religion, education, and skills. The majority of migrants fall within the age range of 23 to 35 years. Initially, first-generation migrants came from lower-middle-class families who went abroad for household's survival, while subsequent generations saw participation from the average middle class and upper-middle class. Religious factors also play a role, with Muslims forming the largest proportion of migrants to the Middle East, followed by Christians and Hindus.

Certain districts within Kerala are known for their high levels of Middle East labour migration, with community models and assurances of success contributing to the normalisation of migration patterns. Gender dynamics are significant, with men engaging in various skilled labour and business sectors, while women are heavily involved in the service sector, particularly healthcare and education. Education levels correlate positively with the proportion of female migrants, with higher educational attainment leading to increased female representation.

Ms Joseph then discussed the factors driving migration from Kerala which include the balance of supply and demand, as well as the state's high literacy rate, which stands at approximately 94 per cent. Ms Joseph highlighted the intricate interplay of socio-economic factors shaping migration patterns from Kerala, underscoring the need for nuanced understanding and targeted

interventions to address the challenges faced by migrant workers. She emphasised the importance of regional cooperation in addressing the multifaceted issues surrounding labour migration from South Asia, particularly in Kerala. She called for collaborative efforts to create sustainable solutions that safeguard the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several educational institutions in Kerala began offering low-budget technical courses in fields such as electronics, mechanics, and communication. Simultaneously, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries experienced an increase in demand for labour workers following the oil boom, leading to the introduction of the Kafala system. The combination of increased demand from GCC countries and the availability of labour from Kerala became a significant factor driving migration. Secondly, despite Kerala's high literacy rate, the state struggled to provide well-paid job opportunities. Previously, the economy relied heavily on the primary sector, including agriculture. However, after agrarian reforms and mechanisation, the profitability of the agricultural sector decreased, leaving many educated youth unemployed. The failure of state institutions to support the growth of secondary and tertiary sectors further exacerbated this issue, prompting educated youth to seek employment opportunities in other states or countries. Thirdly, socioeconomic issues such as land sales, household debt, and difficulties in meeting livelihood needs added to the push factor for migration. The success of the first wave of immigration also encouraged others to follow suit, leading to a significant migration trend and what became known as the "Kerala boom." Moving on to the major issues faced by migrants in their host countries, Ms Joseph highlighted the significant impact of remittances on household development, education, debt repayment, housing, and savings. However, she also pointed out drawbacks such as Kerala's overreliance on the service sector, with primary and secondary sectors declining.

Thereafter, she focused on the issues and concerns of labour migrants from Kerala. One major issue is the prevalence of scams and illegal visa agencies, with the state police registering 795 cases related to visa fraud in 2023 alone. Illegal recruitment agencies exploit migrants by charging exorbitant visa fees and targeting healthcare professionals in particular. Moreover, human rights violations are rampant, with the Kafala system leading to increased exploitation and abuse of migrant workers. Violations include passport confiscation, low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of basic amenities in labour camps. Ms Joseph then highlighted the urgent need to address these issues through regional cooperation and targeted interventions. She called for measures to combat illegal recruitment practices, protect migrant workers' rights, and improve their working and living conditions, emphasising the importance of collective action in ensuring the well-being of South Asian migrant workers.

Accidents at construction sites are tragically common, resulting in numerous deaths every year. Saudi Arabia and the UAE witnessed the highest number of fatalities among Indian labourers between 2019 and 2021. Harsh working conditions, low incomes, and poor living conditions often lead to despair, with a significant number of workers resorting to suicide in Gulf countries. Furthermore, a disproportionate number of Indians find themselves incarcerated abroad, particularly in Gulf



nations. Approximately 45 per cent of the 146,483 Indians jailed abroad are blue-collar workers. Migrant rights organisations attribute this high number to the Indian government's limited support and legal aid for those ensnared in recruitment scams and subsequently imprisoned. Another issue arises from the stratification among migrants, categorised into three sections: low-skilled workers, semi-skilled or blue-collar workers, and service sector employees or white-collar workers. The value and treatment of migrants often depend on the section to which they belong. Domestic workers or low-skilled workers face a higher risk of exploitation and scams by employers or contractors, perpetuating an unequal class system in host countries.

Ms Joseph observed that social issues faced by immigrants are often overlooked, particularly in the case of skilled workers from Kerala. Many migrate to GCC countries for temporary employment with the intention of returning home to settle. However, the prolonged separation from family and society, typically spanning 10 to 15 years, takes a toll on their emotional well-being. Meanwhile, nearly one million women left behind in Kerala grapple with single parenting, exacerbating social challenges. The uncertainty surrounding the return of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted systemic challenges. While the Kerala state government introduced financial assistance policies for the unemployed population, there was a lack of support in facilitating the reintegration of returning migrants into the workforce. Entrepreneurs, in particular, faced difficulties accessing financial and operational assistance, underscoring the struggle to reintegrate migrants economically into their homeland. Additionally, the lack of support from both state and central governments exacerbates the plight of labour migrants. Despite the signing of a prisoner exchange treaty between India and the UAE in November

2011, which theoretically allows Indian prisoners to serve their sentences in their home country, not a single Indian has been benefited from this treaty. This reluctance to implement agreements reflects the limited attention and support afforded to blue-collar workers by government authorities.

In contrast to the challenges faced by unskilled and low-skilled workers, Ms Joseph pointed out that Indian white-collar workers in the Gulf often enjoy comfortable living conditions. For example, Qatar has seen an increase in the presence of Indians residing in villas and upscale residential colonies. White-collar workers typically settle with their families in their host countries. However, the socioeconomic issues of blue-collar and service sector workers often receive limited attention, despite the significant remittances they send back home. Moving to her conclusion, she posited that addressing these challenges through regional cooperation and partnership is essential. The first step is to identify and acknowledge the challenges faced by migrants. Often, these issues are overlooked or considered to be less important. It's crucial for state apparatus and institutions to recognise and address these issues, as many challenges are common across South Asia. Furthermore, sharing knowledge is what she considered to be vital in addressing these challenges. For instance, Kerala's economic prosperity, known as the "Kerala boom," serves as a potential model for addressing similar issues in other regions. There needs to be a mechanism for sharing knowledge and policies where successful models can be identified and replicated.

She concluded by highlighting that regional cooperation and partnership are crucial for promoting the well-being of migrants in their host countries and ensuring inclusivity in their home countries. By acknowledging common challenges and sharing knowledge and policies, she argued that South Asian countries can work together to address the issues faced by migrant workers effectively.

## Presentation 5

# Assessing the Trends of Climate Induced Migration in the Indian Sundarbans



### Dr Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury

*Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata*

**Dr Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury** began her speech by highlighting two crucial takeaways from her research and experience in international relations and regional cooperation. Firstly, she emphasised the importance of trust. For effective cross-border understanding, whether bilateral or multilateral, a strong foundation of trust is essential. She stressed the need to consider neighbouring countries as friends, as neighbours are an unchangeable aspect of our lives. Trust, according to Dr Chaudhury, is vital for enhancing regional solidarity on any issue. Secondly, she drew attention to the issue

of information scarcity. She argued that there is a need for a comprehensive data bank, which should include both best and worst practices. This approach would enable a better understanding of each country's challenges and help in overcoming them.

Dr Chaudhury then focused on a specific segment that had not been directly addressed in the seminar so far: the impact of climate change on labour migration. She noted that all South Asian countries are facing severe natural events such as cyclones, tsunamis, storms, and river erosion, alongside gradual changes like rising sea levels.

Drawing attention to the Indian Sundarbans, Dr Chaudhury explained that the Observer Research Foundation has conducted a study assessing the climate-induced migration in this region. The study divided the Sundarbans into two areas: the eastern part, including Gosaba, Hingalganj, Patharpratima, and Kultali, which are on the fringe of the reserve forest and are the first responders to climatic events; and the western part, including Namkhana and Sagar.

She informed that these areas are heavily populated and face significant adverse situations due to climate change. Issues such as sea-level rise, increased storm frequency, and saline water inundation have made agriculture unsustainable and led to land loss and damage to coastal infrastructure. These factors have forced local populations to adopt coping mechanisms for survival rather than long-term adaptation strategies.

Dr Chaudhury noted that migration from the western part of the Sundarbans, specifically Namkhana and Sagar, began as early as 1958. Over the years, various phases of migration have seen people moving to states like Kerala, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu due to economic liberalisation. Additionally, there has been a trend of migrating abroad to countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Gulf nations, with a few cases even reaching Russia. Dr Chaudhury continued her speech by discussing the migration patterns in the eastern part of the Sundarbans, noting that their pilot study database includes 80 entries for the eastern region and 206 for the western region. The western part was given more focus because it experiences a higher volume of migration outside South Asia compared to the eastern part.

She provided a detailed analysis of migration trends in the eastern Sundarbans, highlighting a significant increase in migration over the years. Before Cyclone Aila, rate of migration was at 10 per cent. This number rose to 20 per cent between 2010 and 2019, and further surged to 50 per cent between 2020 and 2023. Although remittances from these migrants are not substantial compared to international standards, the trend of increasing migration is evident.

Dr Chaudhury explained that most of the observed migration is internal, with people leaving to earn money primarily to repay loans. They tend to stay within West Bengal or move to states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bangalore, Gujrat, Chennai, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. The study also explored the correlation between climate change and labour migration, revealing a strong consensus among respondents that climate change significantly influences migration from the region.

She noted that social networks plays a crucial role in migration decisions, acting as catalysts. Various types of networks were identified during interviews: 72 per cent of migrants relied on residents with prior experience, 41 per cent on agents, 26 per cent on family members and acquaintances, and 10 per cent on media platforms.

Dr Chaudhury also highlighted the aspirational zeal among migrants, particularly those aged 25 to 35, which plays a significant role in their decision to migrate. Finally, she emphasised the need for a comprehensive database to engage the migrant population in policy discourse. She advocated for a bottom-up approach, stressing the importance of understanding migrants' perspectives as they are the primary victims of the situation. This engagement is crucial for effective regional cooperation and multilateral negotiations on migration issues.



## OPEN DISCUSSION



### Professor Ishrat Shamim

*President, Center for Women and Children's Studies*

Professor Ishrat Shamim shared that in one of her research on inclusive disaster risk management, the target population was a vulnerable and marginalized class. She mentioned that the families often migrate within the country as opposed to moving abroad. She then placed the question that even with all the climate change effects on communities like the Sundarbans, why are not people going abroad? Is there less connection with the outside world because of the vulnerable and marginalized environment?

### Sheela Pillai

*Head of Mission, The High Commission of the Republic of Singapore*

Ms Sheela Pillai appreciated the contribution of migrant workers to Singapore's nation-building process and economy, as it is heavily dependent on migrants. She stated that Singapore remains firmly committed to setting acceptable labour standards and safeguarding the well-being of migrant workers. The Singapore Ministry of Manpower focuses on three pillars: the living conditions of the migrant workers, the health and workplace safety, and the mental well-being of the workers. The government has put in place various regulations and mechanisms to protect migrant workers. Examples include: pre-departure orientation programs, settling-in programs, opportunities to upskill, even digital literacy programs, and most importantly, recourse to mediation in case of disputes, including areas in wages.



She then focused on Dr Ferdousi's point on the role of middlemen and enquired about bringing them into the regulatory framework. According to her data, the concerned authorities in Singapore have found that when migrant workers arrive in Singapore, for example, they are heavily in debt.

She added that the migration cost is three, four, or five times of the regulated agency fees. This affects their mental well-being and puts them under financial stress. As a result, they often turn to drugs, theft, and even suicide because they have no way out of the problems. Ms Pillai stated that the middlemen might have an important role, especially at the village level, when the workers may get lost over the recruitment process, where to go, and what to do. She then asked if there was any way to bring the cost down or introduce a better regulatory framework for middlemen, whether bilaterally or regionally.



### **Professor Shah Alam**

*Habib Traders*

Professor Shah Alam posed his question to the Indian delegates based on observations in the Gulf countries. In those countries, many laborers from South Asia lack rights, including human and labor rights. He suggests that Indian delegates communicate with their embassy under the Indian High Commission's umbrella. This way, they could address cases concerning South Asian countries and exert pressure, leading to remedies for Bangladeshi and other South Asian laborers. He concludes his statement wondering whether the Indian delegates have any plans or policies to establish a

forum for South Asian countries under India's umbrella for development.

## RESPONSE BY THE PANELISTS



### Dr Benuka Ferdousi

Dr Benuka Ferdousi began her response with the question regarding the role of middlemen, particularly in relation to the high costs associated with migration. The formal process is that a visa would be issued from the employer in the destination country, and the visa will be processed via a recruiting agency. The problem remains that the recruiting agencies do not select the migrants themselves. Hence, the middlemen act as a bridge in this regard. However, as the middlemen are not involved in the formal process, they cannot be identified. Hence, if a migrant faces fraudulent practices and wishes to file a lawsuit, they cannot do so. This is the reason why the Bangladesh government

is trying to register these middlemen so that they can be identified and brought under some regulations. Regarding cost of migration, Dr Ferdousi pointed out that the inquirer herself gave a hint on how the costs could be cut down. She said that the high cost of migration is associated with the prevalence of middlemen. She explained that even in cases where zero-cost migration is pursued, for example, female migration to the Middle East, many times female migrants pay around BDT 50,000 due to the involvement of the middlemen.

To reduce this dependency on middlemen, the migrants must be educated, and their capacity must be increased. The migrants seek the help of the middlemen, since they are not capable of going through this process. Therefore, the government is now focusing on quality migration rather than solely focusing on quantity of migration. Dr Ferdousi expressed that change in the composition of migrants would reduce the necessity of middlemen which in turn would help to eliminate the middlemen and that is the direction that the government of Bangladesh is heading towards.



### Dr Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury

Dr Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury began her response by thanking Professor Shamim for raising the question of people not wanting to migrate. She then referred to her presentation and stated that the two regions of the Sundarbans are different in this regard. The eastern part is unwilling to leave their small land because they are surrounded by water bodies everywhere. They do not have any direct linkage with the mainland. However, their western counterparts, Namkhana and Sagar, on the other hand, have direct road links with Kolkata, and they have frequent bus services. Sagar is very vulnerable, and it has become famous for different kinds of religious activities. She stressed

that the migration experiences are radically linked up with the culture. Migration in the western part goes back fifty long years since around 1958-59. The eastern part, however, did not have such exposure. As of aspirational zeal, Namkhana and Sagar are close to the Medinipur district. Medinipur's people have that aspirational zeal directly linked up with their cultural aspect. Bose identified these two points as necessary. This is a hundred percent male migration, and they are yet to come across female migration from these two parts of the Sundarbans.

Regarding the point raised by Professor Shah Alam, Dr Chaudhury emphasized that analyzing the concept of South Asian Solidarity is necessary. First, trust-building is crucial, as neighbors cannot be selected. This trust is essential for fostering regional or bilateral solidarity. Once established, a composite unit can be formed. She agrees that the point is well received and she expressed willingness to contribute within his capacity.



### Sugeeswara Senadhira

Mr Senadhira added with Dr Bosu's statement that he finds the proposal of Professor Shah Alam challenging to implement as the relevant missions have an existing workload considering their own nationalities. Even for the Indian high commission, they have a large community of migrant workers and they need to prioritize them first. From Sri Lanka's perspective, they have set up safe houses in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, for women facing problems at work, but it is tricky because their work contracts cannot be changed easily. Even though they are trying hard, there are lots of obstacles. In Sri Lanka, they have made rules for employment agencies and people need permits and contracts from

approved agencies to work abroad. But some people did not like this rule, so they had to stop it until they solved the legal issues. Despite the challenges, they are still working hard to sort things out.

## ADDRESS BY THE SPECIAL GUEST



### Md Khairul Alam

*Additional Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.*

At the outset, **Md Khairul Alam** paid homage to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and to all martyrs who laid down their lives for Bangladesh's independence.

He applauded that the seminar extensively addressed the topic of labour migration from South Asia, which has been given high priority and is extensively acknowledged since millions of people from this region migrate each year both intra-regionally and extra-regionally. However, despite potentials, labour migration is associated with challenges as well which need to be addressed with collaboration among sending and receiving countries, regional platforms and international stakeholders. He expressed optimism that the valuable discussions and insights from the seminar will assist the policy makers in formulating concrete and effective measures to improve the conditions of labour migrants from South Asia.

He emphasised that one of the most significant factors that has contributed to the expansion of Bangladesh's economy is the increase of labour migration. Throughout the previous year, there has been a constant inflow of remittance, and remittance is the second largest source of foreign currency for Bangladesh after the ready-made garments industry. As of December 2023, the country sent a record 12 lakh labourers to other countries. Annually, around 400,000 labourers depart from Bangladesh to seek employment abroad.

He acknowledged that like other South Asian countries, Bangladeshi labour migrants also face challenges. Hurdles that encountered by Bangladeshi migrants encompass exorbitant migration fees imposed by recruitment agencies, particularly for jobs that require minimal skills; inadequate wages; limited access to information regarding migration prospects and associated risks; prejudice, exploitation, and mistreatment while abroad; and inadequate support services to safeguard the rights of workers. Several studies revealed that Migrant workers who adhered to official procedures and acquired certain qualifications through proper training experienced a higher quality of life compared to the less skilled labourers. There are examples that those migrants who underwent



proper language training and pre-departure preparation, possessed relevant skills, and, most importantly, followed formal procedures, could succeed in receiving all necessary facilities from the employer.

The Special Guest underscored that for a long period, Bangladesh participated in the semi and unskilled labour market. Then, under the prudent leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh government achieved notable progress in sending skilled migrants to the destination countries. Currently, there are more than 100 technical training centres under BMET. And, the government intends to construct technical training centres in each upazila. Regarding the capacity of the training centres, he emphasised that previously the training centres were able to deliver training to a maximum of 40,000 individuals, but now they can accommodate over 120,000. At present, these training centres offer training in 55 distinct professional skills, such as intermediate-level management, refrigeration, graphic design, and general electrical work. He added that another major challenge that Bangladeshi labour migrants have to face frequently is the language barrier. Considering this, the government is now planning to increase more language courses under the BMET training centres.

He was of the opinion that since the process of labour migration from South Asia is impacted by several obstacles, it is necessary for sending and receiving countries, along with regional and international forums, to collaborate in order to protect the rights of the labour migrants. Migration has been acknowledged as a significant driver of a nation's social and economic progress in the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and the Global Compact on Migration in 2018. Like

international platforms, regional organisations also include the issue of protecting migrants' rights in their various agendas. Under the auspices of SAARC, a proposal was made for a framework for safe and sustainable migration within the region. Then, the 18th SAARC Summit, which took place in Kathmandu in 2014, ended with the SAARC Declaration that acknowledges labour migration as a matter demanding shared attention. In that summit, the SAARC countries agreed to cooperate to ensure the safeguarding of migrant workers from South Asia. However, as there was no further SAARC summit hosted after that, cooperation on labour migration under the auspices of SAARC did not move forward. As is noted by the paper presenters, in the case of migration, the vacuum of regional bodies has to some extent been filled by regional consultation processes like Colombo Process, Abu Dhabi Dialogue, Bali Process etc. in all of which Bangladesh is an active partner.

He agreed with the paper presenters that we need to look for more collaborative efforts from sending and receiving countries, as well as from regional and international organisations, to safeguard the rights and well-being of migrant workers and promote fair and ethical labour practices.

Finally, he expressed that the insightful conversations and discussions that took place at the seminar will be of great assistance to the policymakers to look for more joint efforts for creating a future that is more inclusive and sustainable for South Asian labour migrants.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS BY THE SESSION CHAIR



**Megha Sarmah**

*Programme Manager 2030 Agenda, KAS, Singapore*

**Ms Megha Sarmah** began by commending Dr Benuka for providing a comprehensive overview of available mechanisms of regional cooperation which she found to be particularly insightful. She commented that Mr Sugeeswara's insights on incidents from Sri Lanka resonate with experiences from Nepal and India, highlighting the commonality of challenges of labour migrants in South Asia. She acknowledged the significance of Mr Hernaikh's perspective from Singapore, especially in terms of information on capacity building, which she believes will provoke

thoughtful consideration. Ms Megha also appreciated Ms Joseph's insights on Kerala, acknowledging its relevance as an example for India and the challenges faced by its migrants.

Furthermore, she found Dr Choudhury's example of the Sundarbans and the discussion on climate migration very intriguing. Ms Megha expressed interest in delving deeper into two issues - trust and lack of information.

Ms Megha called for continued discussion and collaboration, noting that while progress within SAARC may be slow, individual efforts can expedite solutions. She extends gratitude to all speakers, guests, and the organizing team for their contributions. Specifically, she thanked Dr Pandey for his significant contributions, expressing optimism about the direction of their efforts. Reflecting on the decline in discussions about migration since the onset of COVID-19, Ms Megha urges renewed focus on the topic, emphasising the humanity of migrants and the need to move away from treating them as mere commodities. She concluded by expressing gratitude once again and expressing hope for future collaborations.

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