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South Asia–Gulf Migratory Corridor: Emerging patterns, prospects and challenges

Ginu Zacharia Oommen*

South Asia's long historical and cultural links with the Gulf goes back to ancient times when West Asian ports were a key element in maritime trade. The discovery of oil and the economic rise of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries inspired a huge influx of migrant workers from South Asian countries, particularly India, to the Gulf. At present, out of 15 million expatriates in the Gulf region South Asians constitute around 9 million.[1] Of these, Indians are the largest group. The historical linkages, religious and cultural proximity, poverty, unemployment, political instability and insurgency in the South Asian countries are some of the factors that have led to this large influx to GCC states.

The development of the oil industry during this period had provided an additional need for workers in the clerical as well as skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations. As the local labour available in the region was scarce, or had limited experience in industrial employment, oil companies were obliged to import large number of foreign workers in the above said categories. The South Asia region, especially India, receives the largest amount of remittances, particularly from the Gulf. Remittances from GCC countries form the major external financial flow for these countries.

Though the composition of migrant workers has been shifting in GCC countries, a consistent and a significant shift from Arab workers to Asians has taken place, ever since the late 1970s, mainly to safeguard

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the political interests of the oil rich monarchies.[2] Moreover, the Asian migrant workers are considered to be relatively less expensive, diligent, submissive and least interested in local politics. The flow of migrant workers from Asia, particularly South Asia, had given a stiff competition to the workers from West Asia.[3] In the last three decades, GCC countries have massively cut the migration from Arab region and recruited maximum number of workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.[4] Thus the Asian community has become the dominant workforce in the economy of the region.

The strategic and economic implications of 'Asianisation' in terms of migration and remittance flow is quite important for both the sending and receiving countries, as India alone received US $23 billion in 2012 from GCC region.[5] The South Asian community has made a remarkable contribution to the socio-economic progress and cultural development of GCC countries. Interestingly, the 'Asianisation' of migrant labour in the Gulf is the outcome of the 'preference and choice' of the receiving governments due to various economic-political considerations. Table 1 indicates the unparalleled flow of South Asian migrant workers to GCC region from 1,069,761 in 2005 to 1,530,222 in 2008.

Table 1: Outflow of Migrant Workers from South Asia to the Gulf, 2005–09

Year	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
2005	454,628	127,810	207,089	88,230	192,004
2006	618,286	172,837	307,620	128,306	170,049
2007	770,510	278,631	483,757	182,870	188,365
2008	818,315	419,842	643,424	169,510	215,793
2009	538,090	407,077	N. A.	152,272	226,299

Source: S Irudaya Rajan and D Narayana (2012) "The Financial Crisis in the Gulf and its impact on South Asia Migration", in Ibrahim Sirkeci, Jeffrey H Cohen and Dilip Ratha (eds) *Migration and Remittances during the Global Financial Crisis and Beyond*, The World Bank, Washington, DC.

Surprisingly, the global economic crisis, job cuts, Arabisation policies of GCC governments and socio-spatial isolation of the expatriates has not reduced the steady flow of migrants from the Asian region, nor has it created a 'reverse migration' back to the sending countries. Irudaya Rajan is his work *The Financial Crisis in the Gulf and its Impact on South Asian Migration and Remittances* notes that only 5 per cent of the migrant labourers returned to South Asia during the economic crisis.[6]

The recent decision of the Saudi Arabian government to strictly implement *Nitaqat* or the nationalisation of the workforce could be an unexpected setback in the free flow of migration to the Gulf region.[7] The Majority of expatriate workers in GCC countries are largely from South Asian countries. In 2009, the share of Asians in the workforce in Oman, Bahrain and UAE was around 80 per cent while Asians constituted 60 per cent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia.[8] The global financial crisis partially affected the migrant workers as GCC countries had high reserves accumulated which they earned during the oil price hike and they invested this capital to infrastructure projects during this period. Thus the reverse migration to South Asian region was very less.[9]

This paper seeks to explore new trends in the 'South Asia–Gulf migration industry'. This particular aspect has not been given much attention in the relevant literature, despite the emergence of the 'South Asia-Gulf Corridor' as an important epicentre of translational migration with greater opportunities, prospects and challenges.

Migration History and Trends

Although Indo-Arab trade relations existed even during the Indus Valley Civilization, modern historical evidences of Indian settlement in the Gulf area date back to at least the sixteenth century A.D.[10] The Portuguese relied heavily on the Indians in their attempt to secure a monopoly of the Indian Ocean/Arabian Gulf trade. During the nineteenth century when the Gulf region came under British influence and/or administration the Indian merchant communities flourished in a number of towns in the Gulf countries (Jain, 2006).

In Oman, until 1970, commerce was dominated by Hindu merchant community (*Bania*) who enjoyed considerable religious freedom. They served as bankers, importers and exporters, agents for local merchants and government contractors.[11] Among other Gulf countries the Trucial States Sheikhdoms (UAE) comprising Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras-al-Khaimah, Umm-al-Quaiwain, Ajman and Fujairah had extensive trade relations with India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[12] Dubai served as the major centre of Indo–UAE trade. In 1929, the Indian goods constituted 72.47 per cent of total imports of Bahrain.[13] These merchant communities, however, dwindled after the Second World War, and more decisively after the independence of various Gulf countries which not only denied citizenship to non-natives, but also implemented trade licensing systems in favor of their own citizens.

The emergence of most Gulf countries as oil producing and exporting economies and the consequent labour immigration changed the size and complexion of the Indian and other expatriate communities in the region. The present wave of Indian migration to the Gulf countries followed in the wake of the oil-boom in the 1970s. Thus, in 1970–71, there were only 50,000 Indians in the region. This figure rose to 150,000 in 1975 and 1.5 million in 1991.[14] Presently, Indian population in the Gulf region is estimated at about 5.5 million.[15] Indian communities in the Gulf countries consist of skilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, technical, supervisory and managerial personnel, professionals and sub-professionals and entrepreneurs/businessmen. In 1939, Indians accounted for nearly 94.3 per cent of the total clerical and technical employees and 91.1 per cent of the total artisans employed in Bahrain Petroleum Company, a leading oil company.[16]

By 1950, the large oil companies in the Gulf employed nearly 8,000 immigrants from the Indian sub-continent.[17] A majority of these migrants are known to have originated in Kerala and other south Indian provinces. Most of them, even highly educated professionals, were on contract and therefore not allowed to settle permanently in these countries.

The state of Kerala continues to be the largest migrant sending state followed by Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.[18] The

Indians in the Gulf countries also have restructured themselves to the new changes mainly with liberalization policies of the Gulf countries. Out of a total of 6 million migrant workers who migrated internationally during the years 2000–2010, 85 per cent joined the workforce of the oil rich countries in the Persian Gulf.[19] While the construction boom of the 1970s, which has led to the employment migration to the Gulf countries, globalization process and IT boom of the 1990s have accelerated mutual trade and investment in both the regions. Statistics show that the flow of migrant workers to GCC countries was not high in the late 1970s. Even that flow decreased in the mid-1980s, but bounced back by the beginning of the 1990s. It declined drastically in late 1990s, but reached the peak in mid-2000.[20] Table 2 shows that since 2001, there was a significant upsurge on the flow of migrant workers from India to GCC countries, as from 223,668 in 2001 it reached 818,315 in 2008. However, due to recession the flow of migrants slightly declined during 2009–11, but again bounced back to 722,139 in 2012. Table 2 further shows that unexpected upward flow of migrants to UAE during 2002–2008 reduced drastically in the later period, and Saudi Arabia has emerged as the favourite destination. In 2012, nearly 375,503 Indians migrated to Saudi Arabia, while only 141,138 had moved to UAE.

Table 2: Indian Migration to GCC Countries, 2001–12

Year	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Total
2001	16,382	39,751	30,985	13,829	78,048	53,673	2,32,668
2002	20,807	48,549	41,209	12,596	99,453	95,034	3,17,648
2003	24,778	54,434	36,816	14,251	121,431	143,804	3,95,514
2004	22,980	52,064	33,275	16,325	123,522	175,262	4,23,428
2005	30,060	39,124	40,931	50,222	99,879	1,94,412	4,54,628
2006	37,688	47,449	67,992	76,324	1,34,059	2,54,774	6,18,286
2007	29,966	48,467	95462	88,483	1,95,437	3,12,695	7,70,510
2008	31,924	35,562	89,659	82,937	2,28,406	3,49,827	8,18,315
2009	17,541	42,091	74,963	46,292	2,81,110	1,30,302	5,92,299
2010	15,101	37,667	105,807	45,752	2,75,172	1,30,910	6,10,409
2011	14,323	45,149	73,819	41,710	2,89,297	1,38,861	6,03,159
2012	20,150	55,868	84,384	63,096	3,75,503	1,41,138	7,22,139

Source: Ministry of Labour, Government of India, *Annual Reports,* 2003, 2004 and 2005; Ministry of Overseas Indians, Government of India, *Annual Reports*, 2011, 2012 and 2013

The Pakistani migration to GCC countries started with the oil boom in the late 1970s, and out of nearly 4 million Pakistani diaspora, the Gulf region hosts the largest number of immigrants.[21] The economic turmoil followed by partition, poverty, religious affiliation, geographical proximity and volatile political situation led to a large outflow of migrants to GCC countries. The major destinations of Pakistanis are UAE and Saudi Arabia, though the numbers fluctuates time and again. The patriarchal society and the government of Pakistan restrict female migration, and majority of the expatriates from Pakistan are males. Migration from Pakistan to GCC countries is not properly represented across the country as majority of the migrants to the Gulf are from Punjab province followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, North West Frontier Province and to a lesser extent from Sindh.[22] In 2008, a majority of the total 43,000 international migrants migrated to GCC region. Migration to GCC countries reached its peak between 1970 and mid-1980s. It slowed down in 1990s, but bounced back again in 2000s. In 2004, nearly 1.89 million Pakistani workers were in the Gulf region. Nearly 50 per cent of the Pakistani workers belong to the unskilled category followed by 36 per cent skilled workers.[23] Remittances from these countries play a significant role in poverty alleviation and socio-economic development of Pakistan. In the last decade, there has been a steady growth of remittances in Pakistan from US $1.1 billion in 2000–01 to US $6.33 billion in 2008–09 to US $9.23 2011–2012.[24] Table 1 shows the upward flow of Pakistani migrant workers to GCC counties, from 127,810 in 2005 to 172,837 in 2006, 278,631 in 2007 and 407,007 in 2009.

Bangladesh is one of the top 10 remittances recipient countries in the world. The partition of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 and its proximity with India had negatively affected the image of Bangladesh in GCC region. Therefore, the migration too started late compared to other South Asian countries. Interestingly, the country which started with modest migration of 6,087 in 1976 has reached an astonishing figure of 4.75 million in 2009.[25] At present, majority of the Bangladeshi migrants are stationed in GCC region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has emerged as the most favourite destination of Bangladeshi migrants. Between 2000 and 2011, US $ 21.42 billion was remitted from Saudi Arabia alone to Bangladesh. Out of total 7.13 million Bangladeshis who migrated abroad between 1976 and 2010, nearly 2.58 million moved to Saudi Arabia. In 2009, Bangladesh received US $10.8 billion in remittances, and majority was received from GCC countries.[26] The vast majority of Bangladeshi workers are unskilled and semi-skilled, and female migration is relatively better compared to Pakistan. Table 1 indicates the unmatched flow of migrant workers from Bangladesh to GCC region with 207,089 in 2005 to 483,757 in 2007 and 643,342 in 2008. In 2011, the total number of migrant workers from Bangladesh was nearly 5 million. Of them, 80 per cent migrated to GCC countries, 40 per cent to UAE alone.[27]

Political turmoil, Maoist insurgency, natural calamity and political instability are some of the reasons behind recent international migration of Nepalese workers to various parts of the world. Nepal's history of migration dates back to colonial times when large number of Nepalese were recruited in the British army and in tea estates owned by the colonial powers.[28] Massive poverty and social inequality are considered to be the main reasons for the large exodus. Migration to GCC states is a rather recent phenomenon that started in 1990s. In 2008–09, out of a population of 30 million, 3 to 5 million Nepalese were living abroad, and one third of the Nepalese workers migrated to GCC countries.[29] In 2001, nearly 200,000 Nepalese were living in GCC region.[30] In 2010, majority of males had migrated to UAE and Saudi Arabia, while females migrated to Kuwait and UAE.[31] Violent conflicts between the monarch and the Maoists, movement for democracy as well as Nepal's inability to form a viable civilian government have triggered massive outflow of people from Nepal. According to a United Nations report, in 2011 nearly 2.7 million Nepalese, which included 2 million documented and around 700,000 undocumented people, were working in GCC countries.[32] Remittances are an important factor in the economy of Nepal. In 2010, the country received US $3 billion as remittances.[33] Table 1 reveals the incredible bouncing of Nepalese migration from a mere 88,230 in 2005 to 169,510 in 2008. According to the available sources, in 2010 of the total migrants from Nepal, 32.4 per cent migrated to Malaysia, 28.7 per cent to Qatar, 19.81 per cent to Saudi Arabia and 12.68 per cent to UAE.[34]

Sri Lanka, the island country of South Asia, was a victim of ethnic conflicts and violent bloodshed for nearly three decades. The recent acceleration of migration to Gulf is attributed to the political turmoil in Sri Lanka. Though initial Sri Lankan migration to GCC countries was male dominated, by late 1990 female migration had increased substantially. At present out of the total migrants nearly 50 per cent are female. Table 1 displays the uninterrupted and steep flow of Sri Lankan migrant workers to GCC countries from 192,004 in 2005 to 170,049 in 2006, 188,365 in 2007, 215,793 in 2008 and 226,229 in 2009. In 2009, out of total one million migrant workers from Sri Lanka, 82 per cent were working in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Malaysia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia alone accommodates 31 per cent of the total Sri Lankan migrant workers who went abroad in 2009.[35]

Remittances

Remittances from GCC countries play a significant role in the foreign exchange reserves, alleviation of poverty and socio-economic development of South Asia. The remittances flow to the South Asian region has shown a steady growth from US $16.13 billion in 2000 to US $72.51 billion in 2010.[36] GCC countries are the main source of remittances to South Asia, as India alone received US $29 billion in 2012 from GCC region.[37] Remittances from GCC countries have been major source of influence on the annual GDP per capita of the South Asian countries, as is evident from the fact that it constituted one fifth of the total flow to the region in 2008.[38] However, due to the economic crisis there was a slowdown of remittances flow to the South Asian region in 2009, but it resumed to normal by 2011. Remittances contributed significantly in the socio-economic development, particularly poverty reduction of the South Asian countries. In his research on the impact of migration in Pakistan, Arif noted, 'The social contribution of migration is even more encouraging in terms of improving children's education, enhancing housing condition, eliminating child labour, empowering women of the migrant household'.[39]

Table 3 gives a clear picture of the enormous amount of remittances flown to India during the last decade, with a quantum jump from US $14.8 billion in 2002–03 to US $53.9 billion in 2009–10. India continues to be the top recipient of remittances with US $70.0 billion in 2012.

Table 3: Total Remittances Flow to India, 2002–12 ($ billion)

Year	Remittances
2002–2003	14.8
2003–2004	18.8
2004–2005	21.1
2005–2006	25.0
2006–2007	30.8
2007–2008	43.5
2008–2009	46.9
2009–2010	53.9
2010–2011	55.9
2011–2012	70.0

Source: Annual Reports, Ministry of Overseas Affairs, India 2008 and 2012

In fact, policymaking centres in South Asia have been focussing rather more on maximising benefits out of the international migration through the process of remittances than treading any confrontationist path with the generally repressive Gulf regimes. But this preoccupation has sometimes come at the cost of ignoring the pitiable conditions under which the labourers work in alien territories, bearing the wrath of a whole host of prejudices and discriminations meted out against them. The remittances to the developing countries have been increasing sharply over the years. In 2008, India, China, Bangladesh and the Philippines were among the top 10 remittances recipient countries.[40] Migration and remittances, particularly from the Gulf region contribute significantly in the overall developmental process of South Asia. Table 4 provides an unblemished idea of the massive quantity of remittances flown to South Asian countries in the last one decade largely contributed by the migrant workers.

The large flow of remittances have prompted the South Asian countries to formulate policies to attract the migrant workers and also to channelize maximum amount of remittances through the formal channels, mainly through banks, cheques and telegraphic and post office transfers rather than informal channels. The informal flow of remittances through *hawala/hundi* is major concern for the recipient counties. To block the inroads of informal remittances links, South Asian countries have opened branches of major banks in GCC region, and also provide various schemes to deposit money in these branches of native banks. The South Asian countries have formulated many financial schemes to attract the remittances such as Non Resident Account (NRI Account) in India, Non Resident Foreign Currency in Bangladesh, Foreign Employment Bond in Nepal and Share Investment External Rupee Account in Sri Lanka.[41] The deposit schemes are designed to attract large uninterrupted flow of remittances from the migrant workers. Many sending countries have instituted deposit schemes in both local and foreign currencies as well (Gupta and Singh, 2012). Nevertheless, a high degree of informal flow of remittances is the key issue of South Asian migratory system. At the same time, the absence of an effective banking system in South Asia and the social networks among the migrants are the main reasons for the widespread use of informal channels for remittances transfer. However MTO networks are the most preferred option to receive remittances in majority of the South Asian Countries.

Table.4 : Inward Remittances to South Asian Countries from Migrant Workers, 2000–09

	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
	US $ (Millions)				
2000	12,890	1,075	1,968	111	1,166
2001	14,273	1,461	2,105	147	1,185
2002	15,736	3,554	2,858	678	1,309
2003	20,999	3,964	3,192	771	1,438
2004	18,750	3,945	3,584	823	1,590
2005	22,125	4,280	4,314	1,212	1,991
2006	28,334	5,121	5,428	1,453	2,185
2007	37,217	5,998	6,562	1,734	2,527
2008	51,581	7,039	8,995	2,727	2,947
2009 *	47,000	8,619	10,431	3,010	2,892
2009 +	53,227	8,856	10,525	2,812	3,308

Percentage Change					
2000–01	10.73	35.91	6.96	32.43	1.63
2001–02	10.25	143.26	35.77	361.22	10.46
2002–03	33.45	11.54	11.69	13.72	9.8
2003–04	-10.71	-0.48	12.28	6.74	10.57
2004–05	18.00	8.49	20.37	47.27	25.22
2005–06	28.06	19.65	25.82	19.88	9.74
2006–07	31.35	17.13	20.89	19.34	15.65
2007–08	38.60	17.36	37.08	57.27	16.62
2008–09 *	-8.88	22.45	15.96	10.38	-1.87
2008–09 +	3.19	25.81	17.01	3.12	12.25

Source: Rajan, S Irudaya and D Narayana (2012) "The Financial Crisis in the Gulf and its Impact on South Asian Migration", in Ibrahim Sirkeci, Jeffrey H Cohen and Dilip Ratha (eds.) *Migration and Remittances during the Global Financial Crisis and Beyond,* Washington DC, The World Bank

Presently remittance constitutes one of the major sources of financial flow to Nepal as it reached US $3.5 billion in 2010.[42] Table 4 indicates that in 2009 Bangladesh received US $8,392 million and Pakistan received US $4,940.2 million from GCC countries. During the year 2012, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka received nearly US $43,181.79 million from GCC countries.[43] The World Bank explains the remittances trends between South Asia and GCC countries, but the data is largely based on the official flow of remittances. In 2012, India topped among the remittances recipient countries from GCC region with US $29,697 million, followed by Pakistan with US $5,983 million, Bangladesh US $3,058.76 million, Sri Lanka US $2,660 million and Nepal with the lowest US $ 1,783 million.[44]

Table 5: Remittances Flow to Bangladesh and Pakistan from GCC Countries, 2008–09 (US $ billion)

	Bangladesh		Pakistan	
	2008	2009	2008	2009
Bahrain	167.4	154.2	147.8	157.0
Kuwait	949.5	993.9	426.9	427.7
Oman	243	337.4	264.4	278.5
Qatar	324.8	366.3	283.6	375.4
Saudi Arabia	2,733.6	3,194.3	1,403.2	1690.6
UAE	1,739.5	1,958.1	1,289.4	2011

Source: Ibrahim Sirkeci (2012), Jeffrey H Cohen and Dilip Ratha (eds.) *Migration and Remittances during the Global Financial Crisis and Beyond*, Washington DC, The World Bank

Of the total remittances to each country, in 2012, data shows that remittances from GCC countries constitute the major share of total remittances received—49 per cent in Pakistan, 47 per cent in India, 42 per cent in Nepal, 51 per cent in Sri Lanka and 25 per cent in Bangladesh. In 2012, India's total remittances received from the GCC region included US $14,255 million from UAE, US $7,620 million from Saudi Arabia, 2,673.42 million from Kuwait, 2,373.21 million from Oman, US $2,083.99 million from Qatar and US $689.79 million from Bahrain.[45] Remittances are one of the stable forms of external flows as they are less sensitive to interest rates.[46] The trend of remittances in 2012 showed that South Asia received largest share from UAE and Saudi Arabia, India alone received US $14,555 million from UAE in 2012. The World Bank and CDS studies predict that the flow of remittances would continue to grow as the global recession has not hindered the volume of remittances to South Asia. In fact remittances flow to India increased from US $52 billion in 2008 to US $70 billion in 2011, and state of Kerala receives the largest share of the total remittances.

Table 6: Estimated Remittances flow to Kerala, 1991–2013

Year	Remittances (Rs in Crores)
1991	3025
1992	3882
1993	6084
1994	7069
1995	9521
1996	10,761
1997	10,817
1998	13,692
1999	14,438
2000	15,732
2001	17,362
2002	18,465
2003	19,797
2004	21,251
2005	22,828
2006	24,526
2007	30,122
2008	43,288
2011	49,950
2012	60,000
2013 (January–August)	75,000

Source : K C Zacharia and Irudaya Rajan, *Migration Monitoring Study, 2008* and other reports of MOIA, New Delhi

GCC economies witnessed a slight drop during the crisis when vast reserves of capital were diverted towards infrastructure projects. The flow of remittances to developing countries reduced in 2008 because of the economic crisis and it affected home countries adversely.[47] Thus, the return migration to South Asia was very low as most of them stayed back unlike before. By 2010, GCC countries had regained some of the economic growth which had a direct impact on the remittances flow. The economic fluctuation did not affect the flow of migrants, but a shift in domestic economic policies of the Gulf countries are expected to affect the quantum and nature of migration patterns. The recent nationalisation policies and the exodus of large number of migrant workers from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is likely to have an impact on the flow of remittances in future.[48]

Economic and Occupational Profile of the South Asian Migrants

The oil boom in the late 1960s followed by an unprecedented carousel of infrastructure development has attracted millions of migrant workers to GCC region. Most of the migrant workers in the beginning were from Arab region, India and Pakistan. In the beginning, majority of the workers were engaged in the construction sector and the oil industry, particularly refineries. However, the establishment of hospitals in the region by the Americans, particularly in Kuwait, also prompted the migration of paramedics, mostly male nurses in the late 1950s. Nearly 50 per cent of the workforce in GCC region is employed in manufacturing, trade and construction. However, in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia a large number of people are also working in the public administration and defence.[49]

In the 1990s, demand was shifted in favour of care industry, paramedics and IT professionals but the major demand for labour force hasn't declined either. Since 1990s, the participation of the natives, especially youth have increased dramatically though a major chunk of the native workforce is employed in government and public sectors mainly due to the fact that the remuneration and facilities are inexplicably high in these sectors. Consequently, service sector, construction, manufacturing, hospitals, education and low paying jobs like security, assistants and domestic workers are predominantly filled with expatriate, especially migrant workers from Asia.[50] Though GCC countries have initiated numerous policies to restrict labour immigrants, non-participation of GCC nationals in the service and other low paying sectors have increased the intake of migrant workers rather than decreasing the labour flow. The covert and overt restriction of local female participation in the workforce and lack of skilled and competent personnel among their own nationals further increased the dependence of oil rich monarchies on expatriate workers.

Table 7: Nationals and Expatriates in the GCC Labour Forces, 1975–2008

Country	Labour Force	1975	1985	1990	1999	2008
Saudi Arabia	Nationals	1,027	1,440	1,934	3,173	4,170
	Foreigners	773	2,662	2,878	4,003	4,280
	Total	1,800	4,102	4,812	7,176	8,450
	Percentage	42.9	64.9	59.8	55.9	50.1
Kuwait	Nationals	92	126	118	221	445
	Foreigners	213	544	731	1005	1780
	Total	305	670	849	1226	2225
	Percentage	69.8	81.2	86.1	82	80
Bahrain	Nationals	46	73	127	113	140
	Foreigners	30	101	132	194	438
	Total	76	174	259	307	578
	Percentage	39.5	58	51	63.2	84.2
Oman	Nationals	137	167	189	312	374
	Foreigners	71	300	442	503	795
	Total	208	467	631	812	1169
	Percentage	34.1	64.2	70	61.7	68
Qatar	Nationals	13	18	21	36	62
	Foreigners	54	156	230	244	766
	Total	67	174	251	280	828
	Percentage	80.6	89.7	91.6	87.1	92.5
UAE	Nationals	45	72	96	124	455
	Foreigners	252	612	805	1165	2588
	Total	297	684	901	1289	3043
	Percentage	84.8	89.5	89.3	90.4	85
Total in GCC	Nationals	1,360	1,896	2,485	3,979	5,646
	Foreigners	1,393	4,375	5,218	7,114	10,647
	Total	2,753	6,271	7,703	11,093	16,293
	Percentage	50.6	69.8	67.7	64.1	65.3

Source: Onn Winckler, (2010), "Labour Migration to the GCC States: Patterns, Scale and Policies", in *Migration and the Gulf*, The Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, p. 12.

In the beginning a vast majority of migrants from India were uneducated, low-skilled and semi-skilled labourers. However, by late 1970s, the demand was slightly shifted towards technicians, teachers and paramedics, and India along with Pakistan was the major source for the skilled category. The high technological development and the changing economies in 1990s paved way for the migration of high-tech category or white collars— IT professionals, doctors and educated technocrats from India. However, significant portion of Indian immigrants are engaged in blue collar jobs. For instance, in Qatar out of the total 500,000 Indian immigrants nearly 70 per cent are working in construction, manufacturing, and other low skilled jobs.[51] A recent survey in UAE shows that 20 per cent of the Indian immigrants are engaged in professional and high-tech jobs (Jain, 2006).

Presently, a substantial number of migrant workers from South Asia in GCC countries is in the construction sector.[52] Majority of the South Asian migrants in GCC countries are semi-skilled or unskilled workers, mostly illiterate, single and male.[53] Since 1990s, the IT boom and the technological advancement have altered the skill composition of the migrants as well as the demand of the host countries particularly in the case of Indian expatriates.[54] The majority of the Pakistani workers in GCC region are unskilled, followed by semi-skilled, skilled and highly qualified professionals.[55] The statistics on Bangladeshi immigrants show that majority of the migrants are from poor and down trodden sections. Rita Afsar's study on Bangladeshi migrants pointed that hunger and desperation, unemployment and debt traps are the main factors prompting them to migrate to oil rich monarchies.[56]

According to job classification, skilled categories include nurses, teachers and technicians, semi-skilled categories include masons, drivers, carpenters and welders, and unskilled categories include construction labourers, cleaners and domestic workers. The average age of migrant workers is nearly 32 years, and vast majority of the migrants are male.[57]

A study conducted by Williams et. al. (2010) shows that the vast majority of the Nepali migrants (90 per cent) are working as labourers in GCC region and only 2 per cent are engaged in professional jobs.[58]

Moreover, out of total Nepali workers 46 per cent comprises of Brahmin/Chhetri, 11 per cent are Dalits, 21 per cent Hill indigenous, 14 per cent Terari and 7 per cent Newar. Vast majority of the migrant workers from Bangladesh are less educated, unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and working as construction and factory labourer, foreman, carpenter, cleaner, hotel boy, house maid, farm labour and so on.[59] Interestingly, in Sri Lanka, since 2000 the generic profile of migrants has altered in favour of female migration, majority of them are working in the care industry as domestic workers, maids and baby sitters. One third of the Sri Lankan migrants are stationed in Saudi Arabia.[60]

However, the working conditions and protection of labour rights are relatively low in GCC countries. Irregular payment, withholding of wages, inconsistency between the promised and real wages, deduction of salary, non-payment of salary for long duration, denial of medical insurance and long working hours in hostile climatic conditions are quite rampant in the region.

The circular migration to the Gulf, which has crossed over three decades, continues to be characterised by a serious deficit in migrant rights. Some of these so called 'temporary contractual labourers' who have migrated to the Gulf have been there for over thirty years. The large commercialisation of the recruitment industry has made migration in the region not only too costly, but also quite risky. The 2008 ILO Regional Symposium at Dhaka has highlighted the problem experienced by women migrant workers in general, and argued for a gender sensitive management policy. The initiatives with respect to the ASEAN Declaration on the promotion and protection of the rights of migrant workers are presented as an instance. The bilateral agreement between the trade unions of Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait and Sri Lanka towards protection of the rights of Sri Lankan migrant workers is a good initiative in this context.[61]

Migratory Process, Cost and Social Networks

The channel of migration is a vital factor in the migratory process. Migrants use various networks to reach the destination countries. Three main channels of migration are social networks or informal channel, recruiting agencies and government channels. In the context of South Asian migration, social networks play a significant role in the massive migration of labour force from remote areas to the unknown oil-rich monarchies. The social networks comprise of family, friends and relatives and they are the prime source of information regarding the destination countries, and also a vital link to the destination countries.[62]

The 'Gulf returnees' contribute positively in the dissemination of information, providing information on the job opportunities and linking prospective migrants to the unknown destination countries. An All India Survey conducted by CDS shows that 85 per cent of the Indian migrants relied on social networks, 13.5 per cent on private recruiting agencies and a mere 0.5 per cent on government channels to migrate to the GCC countries.[63] Interestingly, migrants trust and rely more on friends and relatives and they also depend on social networks to adjust in the destination countries.

Presently, the cost of visa is extremely high compared to previous years and the social networks do play a crucial role in reducing the cost of migration. The minimum cost of migration in India through recruiting agency is nearly US $2,000, while the cost is nearly half when the migration is through social networks.[64]

In some cases, though social networks provide the initial information, the final implementation of migration, such as arranging visa, tickets and choosing the job is done by private recruiting agencies. Unfortunately, spurious recruiting agencies are on the increase in South Asia, and there are innumerable cases of fraudulent practices and cheating by these agencies.[65] In recent times the overseas ministries of the sending countries are also relatively more active in providing information on the legal procedures, and also caution the public on the fraudulent practices. For instance, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) frequently advertises on the procedures, laws and other crucial legal aspects related to migration and only those recruiting agencies that are approved by MOIA are allowed to recruit workers abroad.

Rita Afsar in her work on Bangladeshi immigrants pointed that 75 per cent of the respondents relied on social networks as the social networks provide first-hand information on job opportunities, socio-political conditions of the destination countries and also about the challenges and fraudulent practices.[66] The inability of the respective sending governments to regulate the migration process had given rise to spurious recruiting agencies across the subcontinent. Visa rackets, smuggling, human trafficking are rampant due to the inadequacy in monitoring by the government agencies. Interestingly, Nasra Shah in her research on the South Asian male migrants in Kuwait highlighted that personal networks are very crucial for migration, and it is directly linked to the duration of stay, stability, economic success and job satisfaction of the migrants. Nasra argues that the migrants who came to the destination countries through personal networks are more successful than those who relied on the government or recruiting agencies. The recent global economic crisis did not cause a flow of migrants returning to home countries. For their sustained stay in the destination countries, one of the oft-cited factors is the support provided by the social networks. In the eventuality of job loss the migrants made use of relatives and friends in the destination countries and stayed back looking for newer opportunities rather than returning to home countries. Thieme[67] argues that the migration of Nepalese workers have been sustained and supported by the strong social networks among the immigrants.

Migration of Women to GCC Countries

The South Asian migration to GCC countries is predominantly a male phenomenon. The relatively limited participation of women as a migrating workforce is attributed largely to the prevalence of patriarchy in the sending countries. According to the Asian Development Bank report, women migrants constitute nearly 15 per cent of the total migrant workers from South Asia.[68] Not surprisingly, study on the Asian women migrant workers has received less attention both in the academic world and at the policy level. *Migration of Women from South Asia to the Gulf* by Rakkee and Kumar (2012),[69] *Indian Nurses in Persian Gulf* (Percot, 2006)[70] and *Sri Lankan Migration to the Gulf: Female Bread Winners* (Gamburd, 2010)[71] are some of the notable academic works in this regard. In the context of international labour migration majority of the women workers are from South Asia–Southeast Asia, and the majority are engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs (Baldwin, 2011).[72]

The oil boom of the 1960s in the Gulf countries lowered the participation of the nationals in the workforce and brought a new form of 'royal sheikh culture' which heightened the demand for maids and domestic workers. South Asian women are mostly employed as teachers, paramedics, nurses, assistants, manufacturing, and entertainment and in the care industry as maids and domestic workers.[73] Gamburd (2010)[74] noted that the 'army of house maids' represents the feminization of migration in South Asia. Historically there are three streams of women migration from South Asia—firstly to the GCC region, secondly to Brunei, Singapore, Hong Kong and finally to OECD countries like USA, Canada and Europe.[75] The first two streams consisted of low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, while migratory flow towards OECD countries consisted of mostly skilled workers and professionals. Initially women workers migrated from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but by the year 2000, Sri Lankan women migrants had emerged as the largest group in the GCC region. In 2009, 52 per cent of the total migrant workers from Sri Lanka were women, and majority was migrated to GCC countries, especially to UAE and Kuwait.[76] Sri Lanka has a long tradition of participation of women in plantation work, garment factory and tea industry. Therefore, it was easier for both the state and the society to accept the large-scale migration of Sri Lankan women in search of livelihood.

Factors that prompted South Asian women to migrate were mainly poverty, hunger, debt traps, oppressive social system, marital discords, alcoholism of the spouse, aspiration for the betterment of life, and so on.[77] In India, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra are the major states from which maximum women workers migrate to the GCC region.[78] At the same time, Kerala has high level of female migration, and the majority of the Indian nurses working in the GCC region are from the state of Kerala.[79] Percot pointed that in Kerala a nursing degree serves more as a 'passport' to move towards a better life in the Western world, for more freedom and fly from the shackles of the patriarchal social system. The socio-economic mobility of certain communities in Kerala is highly attributed to the nursing profession.[80] The South Asian countries except Sri Lanka have approached the women migration within the framework of patriarchy with restrictive policies and irrational conditions. The strict policies of the sending countries had heightened irregular migration and forced the women to choose the risky channels.[81]

Most South Asian countries have temporarily banned migration of women and imposed age restrictions on women migrants, which unequivocally hamper economic mobility and livelihood of the women to a great extent. India prohibits women below 30 years of age to migrate aboard while for Pakistan it is 35, Nepal 18, Sri Lanka 21 and Bangladesh 25. Women migrant workers are often victims of patriarchy in both sending and receiving countries.[82] Sexual abuse, harassment at workplace and long working hours without proper payments are quite rampant in GCC countries. The recent Malayalam movie 'Gaddama' reveals the harsh realities of the maids and domestic workers from the Asian countries in the oil-rich monarchies.[83] Nepal banned migration of women workers in 1998 due to the mysterious death of a Nepali domestic worker in Kuwait and later revoked the ban in 2003. Gamburd[84] noted that in Sri Lanka a large section of the women migrant workers were married; they had reshaped the patriarchal norms and assumed the role of 'bread winners' of the family. However, the precarious issues related to women migrants have received less attention and more women friendly policies need to be formulated by both sending and receiving countries in the future.

The Nitaqat Labour Law

The recent decision of the Government of Saudi Arabia to implement the *Nitaqat Labour Law* is a matter of great concern in South Asia. In the post-economic recession period more than 54.7 per cent of South Asian workers were in Saudi Arabia. In 2012 out of total 722,139 Indians who migrated to the Gulf, 375,503 have immigrated to Saudi Arabia.[85] Thus the decision of Saudi Arabia that one third of the total employees in business establishment will have to be a Saudi national, is leading to displacement and deportation of thousands of Asian migrant workers from the country. More worrisome is the stamping of 'entry ban' on the passports of migrant workers and 'deporting route' of Saudi government rather than the normal exit passage. The Government of India is negotiating with the Saudi

Government to avoid deportation of the migrant workers and marking an entry ban on their documents.

Based on their level of compliance, the Saudi Government has categorized the local business establishments into Blue, Green, Yellow and Red groups—with Blue and Green businesses having the highest localization ratios, Yellow falling in the intermediate range and Red the least compliant. While Blue and Green establishments are being rewarded and Yellow is given more time to implement the changes, companies in the Red zone are under pressure to comply with the Nitaqat Law.[86]

The largest expatriate group working in the private sector is the Indians. According to the Labour Ministry of Saudi Arabia nearly 6.5 million foreign workers are employed in the private sector. The process of unemployment and deportation has created anxiety among the thousands of migrant households in India. Saudi Arabia has declared nearly 30,000 Pakistanis as illegal immigrants and more are likely to face deportation.[87] However, migration experts like Irudaya Rajan are of the opinion that the impact of the Nitaqat Law could be very minimal, and that 'just as these policies had no impact for the last twenty years, I expect there will be no impact this time too'.[88] In 2004 too the Saudi Government tried to impose naturalisation policies but failed miserably due to various domestic factors. The percentage of natives that Nitaqat requires firms to employ varies from 6 per cent for construction jobs to 30 per cent for oil and gas extraction, to over 50 per cent for banks and financial institutions (for firms with less than 500 employees. The natives are quite unwilling to assume the blue collar jobs that are available in the construction sector and manufacturing industry, and unwilling to work as assistants, domestic workers, hotel boys and so on. Already domestic workers from Sri Lanka and Philippines are exempted from the Nitaqat Law due to the unwillingness of natives to work in these areas. At the same time, the financial sector, banking, IT, health, education and corporate sector would also face severe difficulties due to unavailability of efficient and competitive workforce from the native population. Due to the pressure from the sending countries, Saudi Arabia deferred the implementation of the Nitaqat Law until 3 July 2013, allowing illegal migrants to leave the country through normal passage rather than facing jail term or entry ban.[89]

The Kuwaiti crackdown on those working outside their visa a month after the implementation of the new Nitaqat Law by Saudi Arabia has further aggravated the miseries of migrant workers. Hundreds of emigrants mostly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh employed on domestic visas who are engaged in blue collar jobs like gardeners, cook, drivers, male nurses, construction workers, shop boys have been arrested for violating the visa norms.[90] Most of these workers prefer domestic visa as it is relatively cheap and cost between 300 and 400 dinars, while the work visa is exorbitant. A sizeable number of Indian migrant workers especially from Kerala have been arrested and deported to Delhi in the last few months. The Nitaqat Law and the curbing of migrants in Kuwait would adversely affect the migration flow from South Asia to GCC region in the future.

Diaspora Formation of South Asian Migrants

Though migration to the Gulf is both transitory and circulatory in nature, the on-going demand for expatriate workers from GCC states has contributed to the existence of both second and third generation migrants in the region. The Asia–Gulf trans-national movements have a significant impact on the societal and cultural realms of the sending and host countries. By now, the 'Gulf identity' has become part of an accepted lexicon in the region. Social networking between friends and family among Asian migrants supports both the inflow and durability of Asian migrant communities in the Gulf.

The highly professional and well educated second generation immigrants are able to integrate quite effectively with the new economic and occupational demands of the region. At the same time social networking based on family and friends is a major impetus for the long sustenance of South Asian migrant community in GCC states as well as the cause of formation of a strong South Asian community. During a field research among the Indian community in Kuwait I found the continuous existence of three generations, particularly in business families. At the same time, the social–spatial relocation of economically successful immigrants from traditional migrant settlements in the host setting to new areas also shows the upward mobility and creation of a unique identity within the South Asian migrant community.

The business community has leverage over others as far as staying on in GCC region and maintaining the family without much complication are concerned. The findings in Kuwait shows that the children who left GCC region for home countries or other countries for higher studies had returned and joined their parents after completing their education abroad. In fact it was easier for the highly educated second generation to integrate into the IT and high tech professions rather than their parents. Unfortunately not much research has been done on diaspora formation of the South Asian community, particularly the migratory strategies, identity, socio-economic mobility, sense of belonging and connection with the home country of the second generation South Asian immigrants.

Conclusion

The strategic and economic implications of Asianisation of migrant workers in GCC countries, particularly its impact in terms of migration and remittances are undoubtedly an important aspect in the context of the emerging Gulf–South Asia strategic relations. The unprecedented and massive exodus of migrant workers to the oil rich monarchies is surely a blessing in disguise for many of the South Asian countries as remittances constitute the largest external financial flow. The recent global economic crisis and nationalisation policies have not reduced the steady flow of migrants from the South Asian region. Education, health, construction, manufacturing and care industry are highly dependent on the South Asian workers, thus the recent attempts made by GCC countries to implement the Nitaqat Law may not be successful due to the reluctance of the nationals to participate in blue collar and private sector jobs. The South Asia–Gulf migration corridor will emerge in the foreseeable future as a vital component in the South Asia–Gulf strategic relations. At the same time the rise of unemployment among the young nationals and also the inflow of migrant workers from other Asian countries might reduce the monopoly enjoyed by the South Asians in the job market.

The apolitical and passive approach of the South Asian workers in the political sphere of the Gulf society and their hard-working attitude are highly attributed to the uninterrupted flow of migrant workers to GCC states. The social networking and the informal links have added additional impetus to the South Asia–Gulf migratory process, and flow of workers to the Gulf would continue to flourish in future. Though Gulf migration is both transitory and circulatory in nature, the ongoing demand for expatriate workers from the GCC states has contributed to the existence of both second and third generation migrants in the region. However the flow of migration from South Asia still revolves around certain geographical locations, communities, families and it is yet to permeate horizontally in the sending societies.

The voluminous remittances from GCC countries have played a significant role in the socio-economic mobility and reduction of poverty in the South Asian region. The unprecedented socio-economic mobility in the 'Gulf Pockets' reflects the productive and constructive utilisation of the economy earned abroad in the host settings and women contributed significantly in managing the remittances economy. Interestingly, a vast amount of economic capital earned abroad is used by the migrant families and invested in the education, health and in the progress of second generation. Though several studies have examined the economic impact of Gulf migration, limited attempts have been made to understand how the migratory process and remittances affected the socio-cultural landscape of the sending countries. At the same time, due to manifold factors, the complex nuances and the real lives of South Asian migrants in the Gulf countries is not fully researched or explored barring few ethnographic studies.

However the lack of a unified voice, a visibly scrawny SAARC and the non-sensitive attitudes of sending countries have intensified the socio-economic uncertainties of migrant workers. Though remittances from GCC countries constitute the major portion of the external financial flows for South Asia, the migrant workers haven't been developed as core component in the strategic discerning of sending governments. The bilateral agreements of labour rights and minimum wages are quite inadequate to safeguard the social insecurity and gross human rights violations in the host setting. Therefore both sending and receiving countries should approach the multifaceted concerns of South Asian migrants more holistically and sensitively. In addition issues concerning women workers should be dealt with utmost care and policies should be formulated without curtailing the basic rights and mobility of women migrant workers.

Notes:

[1] Ozaki, 2012: p. 7

[2] Kapiszewski, 2006: p. 5

[3] Silva and Naufal, 2012: pp. 381–382

[4] Kapiszewski, 2006: p. 10

[5] Ozaki, 2012: p. 12

[6] Rajan and Narayana : 2012, p. 70

[7] *The Hindu,* 2013: p. 7

[8] *Migration News,* April 2012

[9] Rajan and Narayana: 2012: p. 79

[10] Pradhan, 2009: pp. 34–37

[11] Allen, 1981: pp. 40–42

[12] Chandha, 2008: p. 60

[13] Fuccaro, 2009: pp. 111–112

[14] Natrajan, 2013 : pp. 14–19

[15] Annual Report, MOIA, 2012

[16] Seccombe and Lawless, 1986: pp. 550–552

[17] Claude, 1999: p. 890

[18] Rajan and Zacharia, 2010: p. 89

[19] Ozaki, 2012: p. 19

[20] Jain, 2008: pp. 170–72

[21] Arif, 2009: pp. 16–19

[22] Ibid: 23

[23] Rakkee and Kumar, 2012: p. 36

[24] *Pakistan Today*, 2013: p. 1

[25] BMET, 2010: p. 7

[26] Rahman, 2012: p. 215

[27] Ozaki, 2012: p. 29

[28] Sharma, 2012: pp. 137–140

[29] Mohapatra et al. 2012: p. 27

[30] Graner and Ganesh, 2003: p. 300

[31] NIDS, 2010

[32] *The Himalayan*, 2011

[33] Mohapatra et al., 2012: p. 30

[34] Sharma, 2012: p. 141

[35] Ozaki, 2012: p. 37

[36] Ibid: p. 27

[37] Ibid: p. 34

[38] Mohapatra et al., 2012: pp. 28–30

[39] Arif, 2009: p. 56

[40] Kelegama, 2011: p. 9

[41] Rakkee and Kumar, 2012: pp. 89–90

[42] Mohapatra et al., 2012: p. 34

[43] The Migration and Development Brief, 2013

[44] Ibid

[45] Ibid

[46] Gupta and Singh, 2012: pp. 93–99

[47] Ibid: p. 95

[48] *The Hindu*, 2013: p. 13

[49] Rajan and Narayana, 2012: p. 68

[50] Baldwin, 2011: p. 16

[51] Kanchana, 2012: p. 24

[52] Rajan and Narayana, 2012: p. 75

[53] Ozaki, 2012: p. 34

[54] Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003: pp. 10–14

[55] Arif,2009: p. 19

[56] Afsar, 2009: p. 71

[57] Bohra and Massey, 2009: p. 622

[58] Williams et al.,2012 : p. 36

[59] Ibid: p. 43

[60] Ozaki, 2012: p. 19

[61] Kelegama, 2011: p. 5

[62] Shah, 2000: p. 74

[63] Rajan and Narayana, 2012: p. 80

[64] Ibid: p. 79

[65] Oishi, 2005: p. 111

[66] Afsar, 2009: pp. 28–30

[67] Thieme,2006: pp. 20–22

[68] Ozaki, 2012: p. 31

[69] Rakkee and Kumar, 2012: p. 56

[70] Percot, 2006: p. 54

[71] Gamburd, 2010: p. 16

[72] Baldwin, 2011: p. 4

[73] Ozaki, 2012: p. 25

[74] Gamburd,2010: p. 9

[75] Rakkee and Kumar, 2012: pp. 52–54

[76] SLBFE, 2011

[77] Gamburd, 2010: p. 10

[78] Rajan and Sukendran, 2010: p. 185

[79] Percot, 2006: p. 55

[80] Ibid: p. 60

[81] Bindulakshmi, 2010: p. 169

[82] Kabeer, 2007: pp. 27–29

[83] Manoramaonline.com, 2011

[84] Gamburd,2010: p. 15

[85] MOIA, 2012

[86] Ramachandran, 2013: p. 2

[87] *The Economic Times*, 2013: p. 7

[88] Basheer, 2013: p. 5

[89] Ibid: p. 5

[90] Sanandakumar, 2013: p. 4

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