

Report Review- Migrant Poor in South Asia: A Review of the SAAPE Poverty and Vulnerability Report, 2020

*Swati Mohana Krishnan **

South Asian region has its unique and complex dimensions in all the major streams of migration, such as internal; intra-regional and international. For instance, most of the countries in South Asia have considerable stock of internal migrants – which is often much more than the quantum of international migrants from those countries. Similarly, there are close linkages between the South Asian countries, in terms of migration-flows as there are thousands of migrants from these countries, migrating within the broader South Asian region itself. When it comes to moving beyond the regional territories too South Asian countries exhibits striking similarities. The region also has some burning issues related to the presence of forced-migrants and refugees, whose concerns are closer to human rights issues. Given this, it is very important to have some interdisciplinary enquiries that approaches the South Asian migration, with a closer look at poorer segments of the migrants. In this broader background, the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) Report on migrations in South Asia jointly authored by Babu P. Remesh, Akhil Ranjan Dutta and Mohan Mani, assumes utmost relevance. The report was released globally on 4 September, 2020, during the COVID pandemic and lockdown and is an up to date account of the trials and tribulations of migrants from South Asia. The report covers the 8 countries from South Asia (namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and has been compiled on the basis of detailed country reports from each of these nations.

The report includes seven chapters on various dimensions of migration and a set of appendices (which are the summaries of the eight country-reports, which provided the inputs for the larger regional report)

* Research Scholar, School of Development Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi.
Email: swatimohana.15@stu.aud.ac.in

To begin, **Chapter 1** written by Mohan Mani is the introductory chapter of the report which sets the stage for the detailed, theme based chapters that follow. In this introduction Mani centers the development debate around the figure of the migrant worker and lists a variety of reasons and social changes that contribute to the act of migration itself ranging from agrarian distress to displacement due to development projects to escaping conflict. Data from reputed sources such as the World Bank and UN Habitat is utilized to establish the broad patterns of growth and migration that are found across all 8 countries under discussion. It is also mentioned that Sri Lanka's pattern of growth is different from that of its neighbors, in the sense that economic growth is not accompanied by a huge increase in rate of urbanization unlike her neighbors but this is also because the definition of what constitutes the urban differs in Sri Lanka as compared to other countries. Here peri-urban regions are not considered urban and this influences the numbers accordingly. Apart from interesting information such as this, the author also makes frequent references to films, short stories such as Manto's acclaimed work 'Toba Tek Singh' and songs from Assam's tea plantation workers to convey the impact of migration in popular memory and consciousness. He therefore sets a sound stage, composed of data and facts from a variety of sources, to unpack the details of migrants' lived experience in the South Asian region. The introduction also pays attention to the wave of neoliberalism and 'majoritarian chauvinism' that can be observed in the region which seeks to harden the differences between groups and communities along the insider-outsider discourse. The introduction marks that the report will employ a broad overview and present a critical appraisal of all forces at work that determine the migrant's life. The role of the state and its shortcomings are flagged at the outset to establish that this is a critical overview of conditions and not a procedural exercise in printing platitudes.

Chapter 2 is a detailed account of the core determinants drivers and issues of migration in South Asia and has been written by Babu P. Remesh. It is established here that the 'migration of the marginalized' will be the focus of the report and the aim is to account for the contributing factors that result in largely involuntary or distress migration. Rural distress, urbanization, climate change, development induced displacement, civil wars and social conflict are examined at length and data from reputed institutions such as the World Bank, United Nations, Amnesty International and Greenpeace, among others, is used to highlight important issues regarding peace, social justice and human

rights. Both international and intra-regional migration are discussed and it is pointed out that the citizens of these 8 nations are found across the South Asian region and also the GCC countries. Streams of migration within the South Asian region are also discussed and care is taken to give equal space and importance to the conditions prevailing in each of the 8 countries. Further use of local and regional words and sayings, such as 'Karachi gareebonki Ma' or Karachi is the mother of the poor, are incorporated into the writing which conveys the authenticity of the lived experience of migrants. The chapter also analyses conditions pre and post the migration experience and is written prosaically, without the use of much jargon, making it readable and relatable for a wide spectrum of readers.

Chapter 3 titled 'Women's migration in South Asia', again written by Babu P. Remesh explores dimensions of migration in terms of its effect on women in particular. It establishes at the outset that migration is not a gender neutral phenomenon and that women are the most vulnerable group affected by it. While admitting that the category of women migrants is not homogenous, the chapter focuses on working class women in particular, in keeping with the larger theme of the report and charts the various obstacles that women face and experience as they undertake the arduous journey. The report highlights that most migration in South Asia falls into a pattern of men migrating and women as follower migrants as a result of marriage migration. Further the job profiles are also gendered in nature as men find work in masculine jobs like construction and services while women migrants are absorbed into the feminine care economy or feminized production system in factories marked by long hours, limited facilities and low wages. While detailing this typical picture, care is taken to point out country specific differences also and most importantly emphasize that this typical pattern is being transformed also. What might prima facie appear as a case of marriage migration is many times a contractual deal where women negotiate with a variety of agents, middlemen and even 'fake husbands' in order to comply with the 'jodi' or pair system and gain employment. The migration of single women is also replete with these dangers and the state's response has largely been to prevent migration rather than remove the impediments to migration. Age capping in Nepal, restrictions, surveillance as seen in the FBR (Family background report) in Sri Lanka reveal the patriarchal nature of the state which is restrictive and ultimately penalizes the women migrant, especially the woman migrant of limited means and education. This in turn leads to a large number of illegal routes that get taken which as the author says, further

‘invisibilises’ women’s migration. This comprehensive chapter, replete with case studies and references to cases of trafficking, ends on a prescriptive note urging the need for concentrated efforts from all stakeholders including the government.

Chapter 4 titled ‘Poverty and Inequality in South Asia: State responses’ has been written by Akhil Ranjan Dutta. Dutta argues strongly that while poverty has reduced in the South Asian region in absolute terms, it exists in relative terms and this is clearly visible in the growing inequalities between various classes of people. India in particular has been home to many millionaires over the last few decades but the harsh truth is that the richest 10% of the country owns a disproportionate amount of wealth as compared to the masses. Dutta’s chapter continues the honest and comprehensive style of writing that Mohan Mani and Babu P. Remesh adopt in the previous chapters. However this chapter, unlike the previous chapters, is not just about migrants but about the socio- political and economic structures that are used to maintain status quo and perpetuate inequalities in the way that they have been continuing, i.e through ‘accumulation by dispossession’ as termed by David Harvey. Dutta meticulously examines policies and programs initiated by the states across 8 countries to mitigate poverty and focuses on the following areas in particular: rural development, livelihood and employment, microcredit and financial inclusion, cash transfer benefits, job guarantee and skill development schemes, housing, climate change and adaptability schemes. He concludes that most of these policies are incompetent to solve the problem at the root because they are populist in nature and implemented by neoliberal governments who are constantly eyeing ‘electoral benefits’. Dutta does not mince words and points out the failings of programs across nations, whether it is Ehsaas in Pakistan, MNREGA in India and micro credit in Bangladesh. The chapter ends with the same question that it began with: ‘whatever happened to inequality?’, reminding readers, citizens, students, practitioners and policy makers, all of whom stand to benefit from reading this report, that we must question whether any of the state’s responses has been transformational in nature or just left the skewed structure intact with merely cosmetic alterations.

In **Chapter 5**, Akhil Ranjan Dutta continues his compelling arguments from the previous chapter and focuses on the state response to refugees and migration. The presence of refugees from within and outside South Asia is highlighted such as the case of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Rohingyas in Bangladesh and India. Dutta believes that the efforts made

by states with respect to refugees and their rights is merely along the lines of relief and not resolution according to international conventions and bilateral agreements. He concludes that the approach across the states to refugees is marked by 'shortcomings and adhocism'. Further the controversial NRC in Assam is also taken up for discussion and Dutta dwells at length on the underpinnings of the identity of citizenship, highlighting that it is often 'meaningless'. In keeping with the focus of 'migration of the marginalized', Dutta also analyses the policies in the 8 countries that often tend to discriminate against semi-skilled or unskilled migrants who hail from a disadvantaged class background and reveals the biased nature of state practices.

Chapter 6 is an important and later addition to the report as it focuses on the impact of the Corona pandemic and the ensuing lockdown on migrants in particular. This has been penned by Babu P Remesh and is a comprehensive overview of the various newspaper reports across the media that highlight the plight of migrants at this time. Remesh highlights the failure of the state to provide relief to the migrants who found themselves penniless, jobless and without a social security net as a result of hasty imposition of lockdowns. Considering most migrants are employed in the informal sector, the erosion of worker's rights and lack of job guarantees are pointed out in detail. The condition of migrants as 'stranded outsiders' is also brought out well through newspaper reports and case studies that speak of the migrant's sense of alienation in the city and also being made to feel unwelcome at home. The sense of migrants being trapped in a 'no man's land', despite contributing positively to the running of cities through labour and services and the rural economy through remittances, is conveyed poignantly by the author. Further the greater impact of the lockdown on women migrants and the rising tide of Islamophobia that could be observed during the lockdown, especially in India and Sri Lanka, is also covered.

Chapter 7 titled 'Conclusion: the way forward' is written by Mohan Mani. He summarises the major concerns discussed in each of the chapters and continues in the comprehensive way of providing a holistic picture of the situation. In stating the way forward the report is extremely clear and honest about what really needs to be done. It does not shy away from calling out governments on inadequate legislation and patriarchy disguised as protectionism for women migrants. It notes the conflicts prevalent in each of the South Asian countries and reiterates that South

Asia is the second least peaceful region in the world as per the Global Peace Index (2018). It emphasizes the congenital issues that have plagued South Asian countries from the time of their emergence as nation states from colonialism and highlights the large scale migrations that have taken place across the region, by people, escaping discrimination, poverty and pogroms. The way forward from here is recognize failures at the state and interstate level, Mani points out the lack of success that SAARC has had in being an effective regional organization largely due to the political tension between India and Pakistan. The need for information sharing, building solidarities and ‘keeping the spark of dissent alive’ is also advocated in order to reclaim human rights and dignity.

On the whole, this report contains a rich body of information and useful analyses which throws considerable light on the migration scenarios of South Asian countries. It emphatically underlines that there is a need to have concerted social action from various countries and all relevant stakeholders in the region in order to strengthen rights-based migration of the poor in South Asia.

Where the report really leaves a lasting impression is the detailed writing style, the comprehensive accountancy of all relevant factors affecting migration and the frequent references to books, films, songs and other expressions in popular culture that are better remembered than statistics or data in people’s minds and consciousness. The SAAPE report is distinctive in its writing style and critique of the prevailing conditions making this a very readable, relatable and reliable account for all sections of society.

