Insecurity, Distress and Failed Attempts to Return: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Cross-Border Migrants in India

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Abstract: The imposition of a nation-wide lockdown in March 2020 to curtail the spread of Covid-19 in India led to a series of unfortunate circumstances for the labouring migrant population of the country. With an estimated12.2 crore lost jobs in India, over 10.4 million migrants scrambled to reach their homes in rural areas in the absence of social protection and labour market security after losing the basic ability to sustain themselves amidst the increasing crisis. For migrants from neighbouring countries of India, return migration was additionally challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic. A combination of factors such as lack of legal ability to repatriate, incarceration by border security forces, geo-political crisis in addition to diminishing economic and social resources during the pandemic led to a diminished ability among the cross-border migrants to return to their origins.

In the absence of social security and inability to access employment and incomes due to the imposition of a four-month long lockdown, the conditions of the cross-border migrants in India became nebulous. This paper

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seeks explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the cross-border migrants from neighbouring South Asian countries living and working in India. Many of the undocumented migrants from neighbouring countries, both the legally allowed migrants from Nepal and the so called 'illegal' migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, are engaged in low-paying informal sector jobs. Such jobs have been the most impacted during the pandemic. The paper unveils the challenges and risks that cross-border migrants took while attempting return migration, and examines the coping mechanisms used by migrants who were unable to attempt return due to the interconnected and escalating health, economic and socio-political crisis that was set off in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

In a tightly connected world, already dominated by domestic and international flows of people for various purposes such as education, work and employment, business, personal and family reasons, and tourism, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented tide of reverse migration as people seek to return to their homes (Guadagno, 2020).Beginning in the Wuhan province of China in December 2019, the coronavirus or Covid-19, spread rapidly across the world. Along with promotion of social distancing, frequent hand washing, and use of masks, several countries also adopted measures like lockdowns that banned free mobility of people, as one of the major strategies for containment of the spread of the coronavirus and reduce the risk of community transmission(Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

In India, a voluntary lockdown was first experimented on 22 March 2020

as the Prime Minister called for a 14-hour long *Janata Curfew* followed by an almost four-month long lockdown from the mid-night of March 25, 2020. While the coronavirus was primarily a health crisis, some of the policy measures such as the nebulous implementation of a initial phases of the nation-wide lockdown, lack of proper signalling about social protection measures for the poor, and inability to localise policy responses that took into account the diverse needs of a large section of the population engaged in informal employment, pirouetted the pandemic into an economic and social crisis. The imageries of the initial Covid-19 media coverage brought forth the spectral presence of the migrant workers who trekked hundreds of miles or cycled back to their homes as the informal jobs which employed them suddenly vanished (Samaddar, 2020).

The South Asian region characterised by high population density, entrenched poverty, weak public health infrastructure appears to be highly susceptible to the spread of Covid-19 (Stone, 2020). The South Asian region is representation of a microcosm of multiple forms of migration within and across the region. While the region alone accounted for over 38 million international migrants in 2017 (UNDESA, 2017), moving from within the region towards countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, there is also a significant quantum of migration that happens across borders within South Asian countries as well as internally among the various countries. Internal migration and migration across borders within South Asian are likely to be significantly higher than the inter-regional migration flows. In India alone, rural to urban migrants comprise over 120 million of the total population (Stone, 2020). Four of the South Asian economies are among

the top-ten countries likely to experience the most massive losses in remittance incomes due to the onset of Covid-19 pandemic. Nepal likely to suffer from a 28.7 per cent loss, while Bangladesh (27.8%), Pakistan (26.8%) and India (23.5%) are also likely to suffer massive macro-economic shocks due to loss in remittance incomes (Takenaka, Villafuerte, Gaspar, & Narayanan, 2020).

Within South Asia the existence of contiguous borders, ethno-linguistic similarities, institutional factors like presence of undocumented channels of migration for work in the informal economy result in a considerable flow of population moving across the borders (Ratha & Shaw, 2007;Chakraborty, 2019). Global estimates peg the number of Bangladeshis living in India at about 3.1 million in 2017. This means that among every five Bangladeshi emigrants two live in India. Even in India, Bangladeshis constitute almost 60 per cent of the foreign-born population, making it one of the largest flows within South-South migration (Khadria, 2020). Based on Indian Census data, Tumbe estimates that there were 2.7 million Bangladeshis in India in 2011(Balakrishnan, 2020), contesting the figures of 20 million 'illegal' Bangladeshis living in the country. Although the exact estimate of migration from Bangladesh to India is contentious and wildly varies, the present Indian state has maintained that much of the migration from Bangladesh to India is illegal in nature (BBC News, 2020).

On the other hand, the Ministry of External Affairs (2014) estimates that almost six million Nepalese citizens live in India. The Nepalese population is legally allowed to migrate to India as per the agreements under the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 that allowed for an open border be-

tween the two countries. Similarly, there is a presence of migrants from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Pakistan in small measures living and working in India, although these comprise of a miniscule proportion of the total South Asian migrants living in the country.

Migrants were one of the most impacted sections of the society in the aftermath of the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19. While the state of internal migrants remained perilous and was brought to the fore through media, civil society, and academia, the condition of the cross-border migrants remains invisibilised even after the pandemic. Against this background, the current paper seeks explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the cross-border migrants from neighbouring South Asian countries living and working in India. Many of the undocumented migrants from neighbouring countries, both the legally allowed migrants from Nepal and the so called 'illegal' migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, are engaged in low-paying informal sector jobs. Such jobs have been the most impacted during the pandemic. The paper unveils the challenges and risks that cross-border migrants took while attempting return migration, and examines the coping mechanisms used by migrants who were unable to attempt return due to the interconnected and escalating health, economic and socio-political crisis that was set off in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following this introductory section, the second section elaborates on the methodology used for the present paper. The third section discusses the evidence of present conditions of informality and crisis among the Nepalese migrants in India and documents their struggles and challenges as they sought to return to their homes in Nepal. The fourth section discusses the

impact of the lockdown on the so called 'illegal' sections of the cross-border migrant populations, comprising of the Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans. The fifth and concluding section discusses the policy level implications and theorises the need for greater engagement among countries within the South Asian region for a comprehensive dialogue not only on GCC migration but also intra-regional migration to achieve the twin Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of provision of decent work and safe, orderly and regular migration opportunities for all.

2. Methodology and Data

The present paper problematises the invisibility of the cross-border migrant population groups. Even before the onset of the pandemic, data on intra-regional migration in South Asia has been problematic and difficult to obtain. The eastern borders of India are marked by porosity and fluidity of mobility across geographical spaces that subverts the imposition of borders and boundaries. Das (2010) observes that the exchange and flow of people across the eastern borders of India have challenged the statist creation citizens as political subjects as people and goods seamlessly flit across borders engaging in trade, migration and commute, access socio-cultural and religious spaces across borders and create newer institutional frameworks quite diverse than the imagery of national boundaries.

Given the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic on collection of primary data from field, this paper engages in content analysis of media reports that highlight the conditions of the cross-border migrant populations. Content Analysis is defined as a qualitative research method which engages

in the 'systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods' (Riffe, Lacy , Watson, & Fico, 2019).

It is acknowledged that along with the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, a parallel pandemic of 'disinformation' has also gained ground globally(Tagliabue, Galassi, & Mariani, 2020). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP) found that by mid-March there was already over 240 million digital and social media messages about Covid-19 (Sahoo, 2020). The South Asian region in general and India in particular, is no exception to partisan representations and select media attention. Keeping this in view, the paper relies on news articles published by reputed national and international media houses mainly. The Covid-19 pandemic also led to increased geo-political blame game among countries within the region. Attempts have been made to source news articles from national newspapers and dailies in South Asian countries like India, Nepal and Bangladesh to mellow the impact of intended and unintended geo-political factors and establish the reliability and validity of the study.

The paper analyses data from 66 news items published in newspapers, think tanks, blogs, and university websites in English. While all the news articles relating to the Nepalese migrants were published after March 2020, those concerning the Bangladeshi immigrants also capture tumultuousness introduced through the Citizenship Amendment Bill in 2019. There are 26 news articles that shed light on the context of Nepalese migrants in India. 58 per cent (15 news articles) were published in Indian newspaper dailies like the Indian Express, The Print, Times of India and The Wire. About 34 per cent

of the news articles were published in newspapers published in Nepal like Down to Earth and Kathmandu Post. Two of these news articles have been published in reputed newspapers and university sites the United State of America. Among the forty news articles drawn for understanding the condition of 'illegal' migrants in India, almost 30 news articles or 75 per cent dealt with the issues of Bangladeshi immigrants. There were three mentions of condition of Pakistani migrants during Covid-19 and seven news items related the conditions of Sri Lankan refugees in India.

Textual analysis and case studies have also been used to draw qualitative insights form the given data to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives and livelihoods of cross-border migrants in India.

3. Returning to Closed Borders: Trials and Tribulations of Nepalese Migrants in India

Halburam, a Nepalese migrant working in Bhiwandi, Maharashtra, worked in the textiles sector. He is one of the six lakhs migrants who work on the 15 lakhs looms in Bhiwandi. The power loom sector of Bhiwandi is a male dominated space which mainly runs on flexible and cheap migrant labour. Migrants in Bhiwandi come from states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Telangana and even Nepal. With low wages, economic shocks like demonetisation and implementation of the Goods and Service Tax (Indian Textile Journal , 2020), political interference and shortage of orders, the already fledging powerloom sector in Bhiwandi was unable to support Halburam and his co-workers from Nepal who set out on a return journey of 1500 Kilometres on foot from Bhiwandi to Nepal after the lockdown in India (National Insti-

tute for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, n.d.; Singh, 2020).

Migration for employment purposes is one of the most widely adopted live-lihood strategies in Nepal. While there are several emerging migration destinations for the Nepalese workforce, India has been a traditional destination. The close proximity between India and Nepal, the existence of an open border policy and historical and institutional ties drive the Nepal-India migration corridor. Although cross-border mobility between Nepal and India is allowed, much of the migration remains undocumented and unaccounted for in reality. The Nepalese migrants in India comprise mainly of male migrants, although International Labour Organisations (ILO) estimations peg that women comprised roughly about 12 per cent of the total Nepalese migrants in India(International Labour Organisation, 2014).

Nepalese migration in India has been continuing for over two centuries. They are found to have been working in a diverse range of sectors in India. Newspaper reports show that they have been engaged as agricultural labour, service sector work like security guards, cooks and retail salesperson, plantation workers, in small and micro enterprises, construction work, causal waged labour. self-employed and domestic work. Moreover, there is also the spectre of trafficking of Nepalese girls for sex work, and other forms of forced labour.

In the wake of the lockdown after the Covid-19 pandemic in late March and early April of 2020, several of the Nepalese workers scrambled to go back home. By then, both Nepal and India had closed down borders. Newspaper reports abound in showing a narrative of how the Nepalese population

stranded in India could not access returning to their homes amidst the dual lockdowns imposed by both Nepal and Indian governments.

Table 1: Timeline of Main Events Impacting Nepalese Migrants in Indiaduring Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020

Date/ Month (2020)	Event	Bilateral Relationship Phase
March 22-25	India experiments with a single day Janata Curfew on March 22 and imposes a 21-day long lockdown from March 25.	Cooperation
March 20-23	Nepal bans the entry of all international passengers, including Nepali citizens on March 20. Complete lockdown announced from March 24	Cooperation
May 08	India opens Lipulekh pass in the Himalayas causing the Kalapani-Lipulekh border dispute.	Strained
May 21-28	Nepalese workers stranded in India petition to go home. Finally allowed to enter Nepal on May 26	Strained
Jul-21	Show-cause notice by the Nepalese Supreme Court for discriminatory treatment against Nepalese migrants to India	Strained

Source: Compiled by Author from various newspaper and think-tank reports

Many of the migrants, especially those working in the Northern states of India are circular in nature. It is observed that the since most of the Nepalese migrants are engaged in low-income informal jobs in India, they depend on a continuous income flow to sustain themselves and send remittances to their families. The already established robust migration network provides an instituional framework for migrant populations to find jobs quickly. Another reason for the dominance of migration from Nepal to India is the

absence of requirements for paperwork such as visas and clearnances that makes migration to India much more affordable as compared to inter-regional migration (Seddon, Adhikari, & Gurung, 2002).

The imposition of the lockdown did not allow the Nepalese migrants to return home causing widespread fears about inability to participate in agricultural operations such as harvest. (Paudel, 2020). Small-holder farmers often have limited income and expenditure capabilities. They need to depend on family labour as an essential component of reducing the expenses arising from hired-in labour. Migration to India has been seen as a less-lucrative but easily affordable destination for Nepalese households. Nepalese migrants, especially men, have sought to supplement the limited incomes from farm sector through diversifying their income sources. One main strategy adopted is to engage in circular migration for agricultural wage labour or non-agricultural sectors to supplement farm incomes. Shrestha (2017) observed that shocks like variation in rainfall that impacted farm incomes was one of the most likely factors to spur migration from Nepal to India.

Newspaper reports point out that while several of the Nepalese migrants petitioned to the judiciary and local administration, many were detained in quarantine camps along the Indo-Nepal border for days. The imposition of lockdown not only led to decline in income but also impacted the ability of migrant workers to sustain themselves amidst increasing burdens of paying rent, procuring food and saving some money to return home. The incomes earned by the Nepalese migrants are generally low, as seen by the daily wage of INR 400 for people engaged in apple picking activities in Himachal Pradesh (Chauhan, 2020).

An estimated guess of about 20000 Nepalese migrants stranded in India was put forth by political representatives in Nepal, many of such migrants were causal waged labourers but it also included students, pilgrims and those who had come to seek medical treatment in India (Giri, 2020). Although the Indian and Nepalese governments had discussed bilaterally to 'feed' each other's citizens who have been stranded outside their respective boundaries. With little money at their disposal, Nepalese migrants increasingly depended on the charity and goodwill of local populations and civil society organisations for food and ration support. There are media reports of increasing uncertainty that led to the Nepalese migrants stranded in Indian border sites, such as Sunauli, staged sit-ins and protests in the no-man's land strip. Both the Indian and the Nepalese border security forces used brutal force as the demonstrators were charged with batons and forced for flee towards the Indian border (Dhungana, 2020). The migrants themselves suggested to be kept in quarantine for the specific number of days inside the Nepal boundaries if they were allowed to cross the border. However, despite repeated such incidences, it was only in late May that the migrants were allowed to enter Nepal after being stranded for over 40 days in temporary quarantine facilities.

Given the nebulous situation in which the Nepalese migrants were left to fend for themselves in an increasing atmosphere of uncertainty, it is not surprising that many of the migrants who returned to Nepal tested positive for the Novel-Coronavirus. The angle of India being as a source of coronavirus for Nepal also escalated amidst the border dispute among the two countries. There were massive fake news circulating among the Nepalese

migrants stranded in India that their Nepalese citizenship rights would be cancelled if they failed to return to Nepal, or be infinitely stranded in India. Many migrants in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand who worked as farm labourers attempted to cross the border giving a slip to the border security forces. The political dispute also extended and impacted the image of the Nepali migrant in India as the 'virus carrier' both among the Indian and the Nepalese populations. In a speech by the Nepalese Prime Minster who claimed that workers returning from India to Nepal were not sufficiently checked at the borders and contributed to the spread of Covid-19 in Nepal (Times of India, 2020).

The lives of the Nepalese migrant populations working in India increasingly became precarious over the period of the lockdown in the aftermath of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite being legally allowed to migrate to India, the Nepalese migrants in India are undocumented. This causes discrimination from both the Nepal and Indian government as they do not qualify for the social support provided to other migrant groups, particularly those moving to the Middle Eastern and South East Asian countries.

The unaccounted nature of migration among India and Nepal is reflected in inability of the Nepalese state to quickly arrange for repatriation of the migrant populations in India, not having the facilities of insurance or support from diplomatic embassies and consular missions. Instead, the Nepalese migrants in India are left to be at the mercy of their employers and the benevolence of the civil society in India. This is true even during other times, but was more acutely perceived and experienced by the Nepalese diaspora in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their struggles to return home was

marked by arduous journeys on foot, navigating a labyrinth of repression by both the Indian and the Nepalese states and finally being hailed as 'virus carriers' and spreader of the coronavirus amidst a fast-deteriorating geo-political climate in the bilateral ties among the two South Asian nations.

4. When Going Home is no Longer an Option: Condition of 'Illegal' Migrants in India

Even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the condition of the irregular and undocumented migrants neighbouring countries of India has continued to be pathetic. Since Bangladeshi migrants constitute the largest group of cross-border migrants in India, this section will largely deal with the conditions of the Bangladeshi labour migrants to India. It is essential to distinguish between the long-term Bangladeshi population that came in the aftermath of Partition in 1947 and the subsequent migration rounds in 1971. The migrants being referred to in the current context tend to be younger migrants, mostly coming from the bordering districts of Bangladesh and India who leverage the well-established employment route between Bangladesh and India to gain access to wage employment in India. Das (2016) terms the current stage of migration from Bangladesh to India as a 'migration for survival' as low and semi-skilled young Bangladeshi migrants seek to wage employment opportunities in India. This is sometimes conflated with the rising incidence of human trafficking that has already achieved epidemic proportions.

Although migrants from Bangladesh are mainly found to be located in the North Eastern and Eastern borders of India, particularly in the states of As-

sam and West Bengal, statistics suggest that they have moved beyond the immediate geographical boundaries into states like Maharashtra, Delhi, Bengaluru and Kerala for employment purposes. Data from the Lok Sabha Questions and Answers suggest that between 2013-15, 6700 Bangladeshi and 300 Pakistani nationals were deported (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016). Previous studies suggest that Bangladeshi immigrants in New Delhi work as rickshaw pullers, domestic help, and rag pickers (Lin & Paul, 1995). Blanchet (2010) observed that women migrants from Bangladesh worked in dance bars of Mumbai. Chakraborty (2018, 2019) has highlighted that more recent migrants from Bangladesh are engaged in meat processing, construction, and domestic work.

The Covid-19 pandemic closely followed the heels of the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that granted citizenship to non-Muslim migrants within South Asia. The CAA allows undocumented migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan belonging to six major religious faiths of South Asia, barring Islam, who entered India before 31 December 2014 to seek citizenship on basis of religious persecution in their homeland. The tightening of the borders and the CAA is based on inadequate understanding of the complex migration situation within South Asia. Migration within the South Asian region comprises political and climate refugees, victims of natural disasters as well as economic migrants. Shared history, common ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds and a porous border led to people living in the border areas understanding and using the border in a different way, than it existed in the government imagination.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the Bangladeshi migrants who re-

side in India without passports or legal documents were not able to attempt return. For some who attempted return, the 'shoot-at-sight' orders implemented by the Border Security Forces(BSF) of India have claimed lives of 300 Bangladeshi civilians between 2012-2018, has been a major deterrent. Bilateral discussions between Bangladesh and Indian border security forces had disbarred the use of lethal weapons in April 2018, despite this border killings tripled in 2019, mainly ascribed to illegal cattle smuggling along the border (Vepa, 2020).

Mohammad Syed-ul, is a Bangladeshi immigrant to Bengaluru. He paid a person living on the Indian side of the border a sum of about INR 1000 who provided him information about the appropriate time to cross the border when the BSF guards are not on duty. He works as a garbage collector under a contractor in the Greater Bengaluru Municipal Council making about INR 4000 a month. His wife, Ansala, and his two daughters also came to India with him. While his wife works as a domestic help, his daughters who are ten and 12 years old respectively take tuitions to continue their education. Syed-ul and his wife are both illiterate and moved to India from Khulna district in search of better livelihood opportunities (News18, 2019). The passage of the CAA has disrupted the lives of the Bangladeshi migrants who migrated for wage employment in India. They are labelled as criminals, smugglers, and infiltrators who commit, what Abraham and van- Schendel (2005) term as 'victimless crimes'.

In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, newspaper reports suggested that some Bangladeshi families who worked in the region for a daily wage of between INR 300 to 800 were incarcerated. A news daily in Kerala implied that about one

percent of the migrants who remained back in Kerala amidst the lockdown were in fact illegal Bangladeshis who would not be able to furnish the required identity documentation in their home states for the mandatory quarantine period and hence did not attempt return (Kallungal, 2020). The news article implies complicity of the Assamese government in routing Bangladeshi immigrants to Kerala, based on the fact that despite accounting for over 22 per cent of the total migrants in Kerala, Assam had not started repatriation efforts from Kerala. In Tamil Nadu, supposed Bangladeshi immigrants took to working in the knitwear industry in Tiruppur after distressed economic conditions forced them to leave Kerala in search of alternative employment. Understanding the pressures of obtaining documented identity proofs, Bangladeshi immigrants often pay as much as INR 2500 for fake identity documents such as *Aaadhar* cards (Subramani, 2020). Chakraborty (2019) has shown that Indian nationals are complicit in exploiting the fear and uncertainty caused by the rise of populist forces in India that causes panic among the irregular migrant populations and charge high amount of money for furnishing fake identity cards.

Bangladeshis and other irregular migrant groups depend on political and economic patronage for meeting their needs. Many of the cross-border migrants who work in states away from the Indian border leverage the continuum in ethnic, religious and linguistic identities across the bordering areas and the sharp diversity of India. The fluidities of identity have exposed even the legitimate Indian citizens, particularly from Assam and West Bengal to xenophobic slurs at migration destinations. For instance, farcical assumptions of equating 'flattened rice or *poha*' eating migrants as Bangladeshis

have made news in the recent times in India (India Today, 2020). In Bengaluru, residents of a slum were harassed by public officials by severing electricity and water supplies and razing slums on the suspicion of housing Bangladeshi migrants. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity as the residents furnished proof of being legitimate Indian citizens.

The furore and the narrative of the illegal Bangladeshi immigrant snatching away jobs even during the pandemic while legitimate Indian workers and migrants are left out is also exploited as an angle for creating a xenophobic image of the illegal Bangladeshi migrant in India. Shamshad (2018) in fact argues that the rise of the right-wing parties and its subsequent coming to power in India has driven the narrative of the defining illegal outsiders versus legitimate insiders for controlling scarce economic resources such as 'jobs' during the pandemic. What is often pushed behind the veil is the insecurity and distress among the irregular migrant populations who depend on employer patronage for meeting their subsistence needs. In the absence of the either the civil society or the employer to cushion the shocks during the pandemic, irregular migrants become prey to unscrupulous employers who exploit their labour, commit wage thefts, and bereft migrants from even decent working and living conditions and basic human dignity.

A similar situation has been found among the Pakistani refugees living and working in Rajasthan borderlands in the district of Jodhpur. Almost 11 members of a Pakistani family working as daily waged labourers died of suicide through consumption of poisonous substances(Parmar, 2020). There is little information about the condition of the Pakistani refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that the condition of cross-border migrants in India remain precarious for both legitimate Nepalese migrant populations and irregular Bangladeshi, Pakistani and other migrant groups. The Covid-19 pandemic has merely accentuated the vulnerability and precarity in which cross-border migrants in India are compelled to spend their working and social lives. As the support structures like economic patronage and civil society support crumbled during the pandemic, neighbourhood migrant groups were forced to venture out on their own and adapt to various coping mechanisms in the absence of access to social security.

In a situation, when the World Health Organisation has repeatedly reiterated the need for following safety and sanitation, migrant groups from neighbouring countries of India find themselves forced into trudging long distances on foot, forced into quarantine facilities to wait for many days, refused relief material and supplies by civil society, incarcerated by border security forces or killed in failed attempts to cross back to reach their homes across the borders.

This coupled with geo-political decisions such as the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act and border tensions with Nepal compounded the stress and fear among migrant groups leading to widespread circulation of fake news, a citizen vigilante justice without considering the true nature of the migration between the two regions. Such decisions impact not only the migrant populations themselves but also their employers who suddenly face labour shortages, have to pay higher costs to replace labour, or find

workers to do jobs like rag picking and garbage collection that migrants populations are engaged in.

While considerable attention has been directed towards the migrant flows from the South Asian region to other regions of the world, it is high time that leaders within the region take cognisance of the intra-regional flows and precarity of migrant groups who seek to migrate for employment within the region. It is essential to recognise the historical factors, ethnic, religious and linguistic similarities of population groups across the borders into consideration while drafting a sensible migration policy for the region. This paper reiterates the recommendations of Khadria (2020) that leaders in South Asia should seek *economic integration* as a policy objective rather than relying on divisive and destructive political ideologies that rely on militarisation of borderlands, excessive use of securitisation, incarceration and deportation. A common dialogue on intra-regional movement within South Asia needs to be urgently discussed.

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