



Challenges to Nepalese Migrants in India Amidst COVID-19

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COVID-19 and Migration

With the rising cases of COVID-19 globally, countries are witnessing panic and fear in containing this pandemic. Nepal, a country with a population of approximately twenty-nine million people, sees a similar challenge to contain and provide timely health care to its people. Meanwhile, challenges before a country like Nepal stand higher than other countries in the neighbourhood. In last ten years, international migration has become the most sought after means of livelihood in Nepal, and with pandemic bringing normal life to a standstill, thousands of migrant workers are stuck in the third countries, including India, waiting to return home. The migrant workers who have already returned to Nepal are facing health and financial challenges. Meanwhile, Nepalese migrants in India have additional challenges in this pandemic like being stranded at the India-Nepal border, economic and health issues, social security and employment.

Nepalese Migrants in India amidst COVID-19

Nepal has shifted from agriculture to a service sector-based economy. Remittances sent home by the Nepali migrants abroad is a major pillar of the Nepalese economy. In 2018 alone, foreign employment contributed an estimated 28 percent to its national Gross Domestic Product. Over the years, foreign employment has become more organised in Nepal in terms of financing and opportunities abroad through banks and employment agencies. However, economically weaker sections from southern

and mid-hill Nepal travel to India as they do not need to pay the processing fee to employment agencies or take bulky bank loans due to low cost-travel via land routes to India and the no-visa and no work-permit policy between the two countries. Additionally, the open border between India and Nepal eases the movement of people between the two countries. The open border sees a mass movement of the daily-wage earners, long-term resident labours and students from Nepal to India.

Challenges

Soon after India prepared to lock down the country, thousands of Nepalese migrants travelled back home. Meanwhile, amidst the ban on international flights, many Nepalese migrant workers took the roads to reach the border points in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttarakhand to enter Nepal. While they were allowed by the Indian border force, Shastra Seema Bal (SSB), to cross over India, they were stopped by the Nepalese Border Police as no plans had been put in place for their accommodation and local travel in Nepal. As a result, these migrant workers have been stranded in a no man's land and are requesting the Government of Nepal to allow them to enter Nepal. With no quarantine facilities and medical support available at the border on the Nepalese side, migrants were left to sleep in the open. The lack of social-distancing further exposed them to the risks of COVID-19 transmission. It was in the third week of April that the Government of Nepal allowed entry to a limited number of people as Nepal lacked quarantine facilities at the border.

Amidst the fears of COVID-19, an estimated 67,000 Nepalese migrant workers had returned home from various countries, including India, before the international travel had come to a halt. Similarly, more than 150,000 work-permit holders were waiting to fly to host countries for work. In both the cases, the immediate challenge that these migrant workers face is the cancellation of their work permits by the host countries, precisely due to strict measures to contain any further spread of COVID-19 in these countries. While the countries have health challenges of their own along with deteriorating economic conditions, hosting migrant workers may not be on their priority list in the immediate future. The migrant workers who have returned to Nepal mid-way to the expiry of their work permits and those awaiting to depart have taken bank loans against their foreign employment, and following such measures in place these workers will have financial as well as personal challenges including survival on their own.

Concerning India, the migrant workers from Nepal have long been the backbone of the Nepalese economy and have contributed to India's workforce. With rising numbers of unemployed people in Nepal during the present crisis, these migrant workers may opt to come to India for work for obvious reasons like open border, no-work permit and inexpensive travel cost. The bordering Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand may see a surge in migrant workers arriving from Nepal in search for work after international travel between the two countries is eased. With India having employment challenges of its own in the post-COVID-19 lockdown phase, managing new migrant workers from Nepal will be a challenging task for India.

Due to an open border, the exact figures of Nepalese living in India are not precise. Yet it is estimated that more than three million Nepalese reside in India to work and study. The migrant workers who have opted to stay back in India are already witnessing difficulties at the present time. In areas like Munirka and Paharganj in Delhi, Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, Raxaul in Bihar and Siliguri in West Bengal where a large number of Nepalese workers migrate, live in rented buildings and receive payments on a daily basis. They are involved in the household and construction works as well some of them have investments in the hospitality sector. With lockdown in place, the first challenge they face is the payment of house rents. The Government of India and local Governments in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh have initiated protection plans where house owners shall not force the tenants for rent for three months. However, they are prone to being expelled from the buildings after the protection period is over as finding new employment will be more difficult than in the past.

Conclusion

Nepal is facing an immediate health challenge, including an acute shortage of medical facilities and supplies to contain COVID-19. Amidst this, ensuring employment opportunities to the local population along with the returnees from third countries will be a challenging task for the Government of Nepal in the days to come. Although the Government of Nepal has placed a minimum 100 days Prime Minister Employment Programme to ensure employment opportunities, it has received criticism across Nepal. The Programme has created 22,62,269 days of work for a total of 1,75,909 applicants, providing thirteen days of work on the national average. With new job seekers registering with the Programme, Government of Nepal will run out of the employment opportunities in the post-lockdown

phase. In this light, the Government needs to work in coordination with the host countries to chalk out employment opportunities for the returnees and those holding new work permits. Meanwhile, India, as its next-door neighbour, Nepal needs to work in coordination with New Delhi to ensure the safety and security of the Nepalese workers residing in India. It also needs to request for stagewise entry to the new migrant job seekers in India following the health protocols.

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