The Plight of South Asian Migrant Workers in the Gulf

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Remittances have played a key role in South Asia’s economic growth. In 2018, South Asia received remittances to the estimate of USD 131 billion, according to a World Bank Report. India had received a significant chunk of this amount, USD 79 billion, and was the largest recipient of remittances not just in South Asia, but globally. A large chunk of remittances in South Asia, come from GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states – Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Muscat and Bahrain – where workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal account for a significant percentage of the work force. If one were to look at the impact of corona virus outbreak on GCC, as of 12 April 2020, the total number of deaths in GCC countries was over 88 with 13213 confirmed cases. Saudi Arabia is the worst hit country in GCC with 4033 cases and 52 deaths followed by UAE with 3,736 cases including 20 deaths. While Dubai imposed a lockdown on 4 April 2020, Saudi Arabia sealed of parts of Jeddah.

Post COVID-19 Scenario

Post COVID-19 outbreak, the entire South Asia is likely to be impacted by the reduction of remittances, as a result of the likely slowdown of economies in GCC, and the possible return of many workers to South Asia (even other countries like Malaysia and Singapore, which are home to South Asian workers are likely to suffer economically, and a large number of workers could return back). It would be pertinent to point out, that even before the outbreak of
the COVID-19, the slowdown in the Middle East, and migration to the Gulf, from South Asia, has reduced. It is for these reasons that remittances for 2019 had been estimated to be far lesser.

**Safety and Security of Workers**

For very long, the discussion with regard to South Asian blue collared workers, has focused on remittances. Some of the challenges which blue collared workers in the Gulf, face, are poor working conditions, no provision of basic medical facilities, non-payment of salaries and harassment by employers, including confiscation of passports, that often gets ignored. At this point of time, the safety of migrant workers from South Asia in the Gulf, and treatment of those infected, as there are a large number of cases, should be the priority of their respective governments and all the rights-based organisations, apart from their subsistence such as access to food and basic requirements. Advocacy groups have repeatedly flagged the point, that due to cramped accommodation, migrant workers are more susceptible to contracting the virus, as we look at the cases in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar.

**Assurances of Host Countries**

Some welcome steps have been taken by GCC countries for migrant workers. For instance, Saudi Arabia has stated, that it would provide health care for undocumented residents. The UAE, on the other hand, is automatically renewing work visas which have expired. The Government of Qatar has announced that workers under quarantine or receiving treatment would still receive their salaries.

A number of other significant steps were taken after continuous sessions of lobbying and exerting pressure by a number of organizations. While Saudi Arabia announced release of foreign detainees who had been held for non-
violent and immigration related offences, Kuwait offered one-month amnesty to workers who were staying illegally in the country by offering a free ticket and exemption from any fine.

**Steps Taken to Address Problems**

If one were to look at the responses by various countries in South Asia, then it is evident that India has been in constant touch with GCC countries, and has promised to work with local governments to quarantine them in facilities, and will also assist in providing workers with health facilities. So far, around 2,000 Indian expatriates have either been quarantined or treated for the deadly virus.

It would be pertinent to point out that UAE and Kuwait have offered to repatriate Indian workers in the Gulf. The Indian Government, has so far stated, that given the lockdown in India, repatriation of workers is not possible. India has stated that repatriation may be possible on priority basis, once the lockdown in India is removed. The state of Kerala, from where the most Indian expats come from, had raised the issue of safety of workers in the Gulf.

With regard to this, a petition has also been recently filed in the Indian Supreme Court, by Pravasi Legal Cell which has sought appropriate arrangements for the rescue and repatriation of Indian workers stranded in the Gulf countries. The petition mentions the cramped conditions in which workers are being forced to live followed by the unhealthy sanitary conditions and how it is tough to prevent the spread of the disease in such situations.

Pakistan is also in talks with the UAE to repatriate its workers settled there as over 20,000 Pakistani workers have registered with the local consulate. Given the rise of cases in Pakistan, it has stated that while it is keen to bring Pakistani workers back, it needs to have proper quarantine and treatment facilities intact. Other South Asian countries like Bangladesh too are trying to ensure that workers stranded in the Gulf have access to food and
necessary medical facilities. Therefore, the common challenge for all South Asian countries in the short run, is the inability to repatriate workers at this point of time, when the lock down is on. In the long run, there are also likely to be major economic problems.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that while blue collar workers play a significant role in the economic development of their home as well as their host countries, their plight does not get the attention it deserves. But, on the other hand, issues pertaining to professionals gets space and attention. Hopefully, over the coming weeks, the respective governments, along with the activists, will put the safety of blue collared workers in the Gulf on priority. Similarly, in the long run, a plan needs to be drawn out for rehabilitation of workers, who want to return to South Asia. Recently, some encouraging strides have been made towards cooperation in South Asia in the context of COVID-19 – especially the setting up of a SAARC Coronavirus Emergency Fund. Until the repatriation of workers is possible, South Asian countries can explore potential ways of working jointly for ensuring the safety and well-being of workers currently stranded in the Gulf. This could be viewed as an important step towards greater regional cooperation.

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