

# Status of Foreign Labour Migration and Impact of Migrants by COVID-19 in Nepal

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## Abstract

*The paper based on the status of labour migration and remittances of Nepal in 2014 to 2022. The aims of this paper are to find out the situation of foreign labour migration in Nepal and to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the Outflow of Nepali Migrants. It is descriptive in nature and entirely based on secondary sources of information. The trends in foreign employment are presented for past eight years, 2009/10-2018/19. Although Nepal labour migration report 2022 and preliminary report of 2021, this report reiterates those trends along with updated data from the past fiscal year to create a single comprehensive report. According to National Living Standard Survey 2011, 56 percent of Nepali households have at least one member of their family working and living abroad. The remittances sent by these members have helped improve the standard of living of Nepali households. In 2020, the remittances sent by migrant workers covered to 23.5 percent of the Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Therefore, international labor migration plays a huge role in keeping Nepal's economy afloat. The decision of the youths to go abroad as labor was a strategy to escape from the potential threat, livelihood options, and get new country experience which ultimately became the major source to bring back remittance. Though low-skilled, foreign labor migration has been the major phenomenon for the country, which is now fully dependent on the remittance economy and counts for over one-fourth of the total national income. Nepal has undertaken several policy measures to overcome these anomalies. Although the implementation aspect is fragile to meet the ground reality, and from the notion of strategic intervention, it is necessary to revisit the policy measures to make foreign labor migration safe, secure, and informed choice based.*

**Keywords:** Foreign labor migration, labour force, remittance, poverty & GDP.

## Introduction

Labor migration in Nepal is considered a livelihood strategy (Seddon, 2007), male-dominated (Sharma, 2007), and has a colonial legacy (Bashyal, 2014). The cultural and economic status motivates out-migration (Gardner, 2004). The notion of 'Kamaune' [earning] is the social reality of the migration process. As a result of the way system built in Nepal, foreign labor migration has turned out to be low-skilled, less educated, and a livelihood strategy for families. This phenomenon has created many vulnerabilities as the migrants fall prey to uncertain promises, recruitment fraud, abuse, wage theft, human trafficking, and similar risks.

Historically, Nepal used to be known to the rest of the world as the country of *Lahure*, that is, a tradition of Nepali muscular youth recruited to serve in the British Army and then British India as a part of livelihood for their family in the remote Nepali living with abject poverty (IOM, 2019; Kangsakar, 2003; Seddon et al., 2002). The scarcity of jobs and

opportunities continues in Nepal even after the promulgation of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to employment (Article 33), the right to labor (Article 34), and the right to live with dignity (Article 16) (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Seven years have elapsed since the promulgation of the Constitution, and even today, Nepali youth are pursuing better labor work in India, Gulf countries, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, and different parts of the European and American countries. An estimated five million Nepali are employed in foreign countries. The last population census of Nepal held in 2011 showed that around 40% of migrant workers leave for India, while the other 60 percent leave for the third countries (Khatiwada, 2014).

Although Nepal has witnessed an increase in the number of Nepali women seeking work abroad and being gradually recognized as important economic actors, the percentage is quite below, close to 9% (IOM, 2019; Khatiwada, 2014). IOM (2019) further elaborates: The risk of exploitation and abuse of women migrant workers is high, particularly in largely unregulated sectors such as domestic work, and the Government has put in place a series of measures seeking to protect women migrants. To date, these measures have met with limited success and there is still evidence that many women migrants are in situations of risk.

Globally, the raise in migration of workers across countries, the economic and social well-being of migrants, their families and their communities has been increasing. Growth in the number of international migrants has been robust over the last two decades, reaching 281 million people living outside their country of origin in 2020, up from 173 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010. Currently, international migrants represent about 3.6 per cent of the world's population (UN DESA, 2020).

International labour migration has emerged as a major global issue that affects most nations on the international, regional and national policy agendas. Labour, migrant workers contribute to growth and development in their countries of employment. Many migrant workers, especially low-skilled workers, face exploitative working conditions and enjoy only limited human and labour rights (ILO, 2010). Many migrants are motivated by the quest for higher wages and better opportunities, responding to the demand for their skills abroad, but many others are forced to migrate because of famine, natural disasters, violent conflict, persecution or simply a lack of decent work in their home country. Migration in search of work has increasingly become a livelihood strategy for both women and men because of the lack of opportunities for full employment and decent work in many developing countries.

Existing research pointed out that, like in other South Asian countries, Nepali migration is also considered a masculine phenomenon (Sharma, 2007). It is because of the traditional belief that males are breadwinners and females are housewives, and the culture of mobility is also limited for them in public places. In 1985, the Government of Nepal started to formalize the migration process abroad except in India, and the process is highly dependent on private recruitment agencies. Many Nepali migrants work in the informal sector in India, in restaurants, as domestic workers, as guards or porters, and in brothels, meaning that they are potentially exposed to exploitation with no legal recourse. Trafficking women and girls into prostitution, children into circuses, and men for body part harvesting are all known to exist,

but the lack of data means that the extent and volume of these crimes, while presumed to be significant, are largely unknown (NHRC, 2018).

India has become the main route for many Nepali migrant workers to the third countries. Previously, Nepalis did not need to show labor permit documentation when traveling to a third country via India. However, given a rise in Nepalis going abroad without proper documentation and the risk of human trafficking, the Nepali Government has put in place a procedure whereby Nepalis who wish to depart India need to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Nepali Embassy in New Delhi (Department of Immigration, 2019). This NOC needs to be shown to Indian airport authorities to obtain clearance to leave (IOM, 2019).

Every day about 1500 Nepalis officially leave the country to work abroad. About 2 to 3 million Nepali men and women are currently working abroad, other than India, mainly in low-skilled jobs and mostly on time-limited contracts.

Nepali workers working abroad are about 10 percent of Nepal's total population. Since 2000, more than 8,500 Nepali migrant workers have died in Gulf Coordination Committee (GCC) countries and Malaysia (MoLESS, 2020).

### Objectives

- To find out the situation of foreign labour migration in Nepal.
- To examine the impact of COVID-19 on the outflow of Nepali Migrants.

### Methodology

This article is descriptive in nature and entirely based on secondary sources of migration related information. The trends in foreign employment are presented for past eight years, 2009/10-2018/19. Although Nepal labour migration report 2022 and preliminary report of 2021, this report reiterates those trends along with updated data from the past fiscal year to create a single comprehensive report.

### Results and Discussions

The decision-making model of migration came into discourse in the 90s when Judson (1990), who attempted to develop a formal theory of decision-making in human migration, indicated several shortcomings, such as examining residential preferences without reference to other constraints impacting the migration decision, which are addressed in this chapter. Hampton later (2007) concluded that "many actual decision-making problems incorporate higher-order structures, involving interdependencies between stimuli, actions, and subsequent rewards. It is not known whether brain regions implicated in decision making, such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, employ a stored model of the task structure to guide choice (model-based decision making) or merely learn action or state values without assuming higher-order structures, as in standard reinforcement learning (Khatiwada, 2014).

Long-term labour migration is more likely to originate from rural areas (61%) than urban areas (using the new urban/rural categorization explained above), and in the nearest future,

this trend will remain stable. This finding is similar to the profile in most surveyed foreign countries, where the majority of long-term migrant workers originate from rural areas. Long-term migration is clearly men led in Nepal with 93 per cent men and only 7 per cent women, and this will continue to be so in the nearest future. It mirrors the similar current pattern for short-term international labour migration. Unlike short-term labour migration, where the main destination country is India, long-term labour migration flows are directed towards five main destination countries – Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, India and the United Arab Emirates (Table -1) . Overall, long-term migration flows from Nepal are directed towards two main regions of destination: GCC countries (53%) and Asian countries (42%). However, when combining short-term and long-term migrant stocks, India is the most preferred destination country with a total estimated number of 719,100 Nepalese working there (or 29 per cent of the total long and short-term migrant stock). When looking at the 309,600 potential long-term migrant workers, shifts in preferences towards the main countries of destination appear. Qatar becomes the stated preference of 28 per cent of potential long-term migrant workers, then UAE (23%) and Saudi Arabia (18%), while Malaysia is preferred only by 9 per cent. 75 per cent of potential long-term migrant workers consider migrating to GCC countries, compared to 53 per cent at present.

**Table -1 : Breakdown of long-term labour migration by destination country**

S.N	Destination of Country	Population	Percent
1	Malaysia	489,400	24.1
2	Qatar	399,100	19.6
3	Saudi Arabia	381,900	18.8
4	India	288,200	14.2
5	UAE	214,700	10.6
6	Kuwait	56,900	2.8
7	USA	31,100	1.5
8	Japan	29,100	1.4
9	Korea	23,200	1.1
10	Australi	21,000	1.0
11	Bahrain	16,400	0.8
12	UK	12,400	0.6
13	Other country	70,700	3.5

Sources: International Migration Survey, 2017.

Nepal has shown three main destinations (reflected in detail in this study) that are starkly different in terms of costs and return, and the migration flows to these destinations are substantial. India is chosen mainly because of the ethno linguistic similarity between the two countries as well as for the low cost of migration. Nepal maintains an open border with India, where citizens from one country are free to enter the other at any time without any restrictions, paperwork, or clearances. This allows workers of either country to take advantage of the economic opportunities in the other. Nepali migrant workers choosing Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE do so primarily because of a high demand for relatively low and middle skilled labour, income differentials, and existing

intergovernmental agreements with these countries, as well as institutional infrastructures facilitating the employment process (manpower and recruitment agencies). Most of the current migration to non-India destinations, especially to the Persian Gulf countries and Malaysia, happens through recruitment agents.

**Table 2: Estimated number of migrant workers with informal employment status in top 10 countries of destination, as a percentage of total short-term and long-term migrant workers in the respective country.**

S.N	Long-term migrants	long- term Migration	Short- term migrants
1	India	197,542	80 %
2	USA	13,217	69 %.
3	Australia	16,644	58 %
4	Japan	9,890	54 %
5	Republic of Korea	2,214	10 %
6	UAE	5,746	3 %
7	Qatar	12,335	3 %
8	Saudi Arabia	10,976	3 %
9	Malaysia	8,596	2 %
10	Kuwait	1189	2%
11	GCC countries	31,103	3 %
12	Asian countries	221,935	26 %
13	Other countries	41,044	55%

Sources: International Migration, 2017.

According to the HH survey, 85 per cent of long-term migrant family members have regularized their employment status abroad. The rate of irregular long-term labour migration in Nepal is very low (table 2). Looking at regions of destination, the highest share of long-term migrant workers with informal employment status is in other countries (over half or 41,000 individuals), compared to 26 per cent in Asian countries (or 222,000 individuals) and only 3 per cent in GCC countries. Top four countries of employment with the highest proportion of long-term migrant workers with informal employment status are India (80%), USA (69%), Australia (58%) and Japan (54%). The rate of informal labour migration among short-term migrant workers is significantly higher – nine out of ten migrants. This is particularly the case of short-term migrant workers in India (95% are employed in informal sectors), but also in When combining short and long-term migrant workers, it appears that the top four countries of destination with the highest proportion of Nepali migrant workers without formal employment contracts are India (89% or about 535,000 individuals), USA (69%), Australia (58%) and Japan (54%). Overall, 636,400 (25%) short and long-term Nepali migrant workers have informal employment status. In terms of destination regions, Other countries lead with 56 per cent of the total number of short and long-term migrant workers working in 2015 in that region, followed by 47 per cent in Asian countries (mainly India) On average, Nepali long-term migrant workers have a high level of regularization, with about 84 per cent working on a contractual basis and only around 14 per cent employed without a contract. Very few percentages of long-term migrant workers (67%) have been working on a contractual basis in Asian countries, particularly in India. This may be

explained by lack of visa requirements, and the lack of effective labour legislation enforcement, which has led to a growing informal sector.

Nepali migrants to international destinations beyond India have increased significantly from about 200,000 in the 1950s to approximately two million by 2011. The most visible change occurred between 2001 and 2011 when Nepali migrants increased twofold.

**Table 3: Absentees Population from Households Abroad by Sex, Nepal, 1981–2021**

Census	Absentee Population	Migration to Abroad (Except India)	Male	Female
1981	402,977	27,781	20,277	-
1991	658,290	40,481	32,477	7,120
2001	762,181	173,131	158,989	-
2011	1,921,494	1,178,926	1,062,755	4,865
2021	2,169,478		1,763,315	406,163

Source: CBS (2014; 2022)

In terms of the proportion of the migrants, the ratio of females going to the West (USA, Canada, and the European Union) is higher than those going anywhere else. Of the total migrants in the ‘USA and Canada’ and ‘European Union countries, about 33 percent and 37 percent, respectively, were females, with those going to ‘Other Asian’ countries (at 21.9 percent) a distant third (Khatiwada, 2014). After enacting the Foreign Employment Act (FEA), 2007, the trend of labor migration from Nepal concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia. There is a greater demand for migrants in GCC countries. From 2008/09 to 2014/15, labor migration to these countries accounted for 85 percent of all migration activities.

Similarly, among them, labor migration is highly male-centric, and it is more than 95 percent of all those obtained labor permits. The Department of Foreign Department database shows that over 3.5 million labor permits had been issued in nine years till 2016/17 since the enactment of the Foreign Employment Act in 2007.

As per the preliminary report of the 2021 census, 2.1 million Nepalese population are abroad. While the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has so far approved 110 countries as labor migration destinations for Nepalis, it is estimated that Nepalis work in as many as 172 countries. Nevertheless, Nepal’s foreign employment is concentrated in only a handful of countries: India, Qatar, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Driven by the oil boom in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, countries and shortages of labor in South East and East Asian countries like Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, migration of Nepali workers shot up in the past two decades. Looking at the trend of labor permit issuance by the DoFE, Nepal had been experiencing a steady rise in outbound migration since the 2000s. The number of labor permits issued peaked at 2013/14, reaching a high of 519,638, before continuously falling in the following years. Furthermore, due to

the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions imposed on the movement of people, only 72,081 labor permits were issued in 2020/21 (DoFE, 2020).

**Table 4: Top Destination Countries for Foreign Employment, 2008/09–2016**

Destination Countries	Percentage (%)
Malaysia	29.88
Qatar	21.57
Saudi Arabia	20.37
UAE	10.62
Kuwait	2.54
Republic of Korea	1.32
Bahrain	0.86
Oman	0.63
Japan	0.35
Lebanon	0.21
Other countries	11.65

Source: DoFE (2018)

The labor permits are acquired either through recruitment agencies or personal initiatives. There is a variation in the proportion of labor permits issued. More than two-thirds of the labor migrants sought permits via recruitment agencies, and there is a corresponding decline in the labor permits issued at the individual level, which stood at about 25% in the year 2008–2009 and declined to almost 8% in 2016–2017 (MoLE, 2016/17).

In July 2015, the Nepali Government adopted the ‘free visa, free ticket’ policy, but the amount migrants can pay recruitment agents at about USD170. However, this policy has been flouted with the full knowledge of the government of Nepal<sup>5</sup>. The number of Nepali migrants abroad is estimated to be bigger than government records. This has been attributed to the Nepal government's lack of an effective monitoring system and controlled permit mechanism. Agents very often mislead Nepali youths to go abroad through illegal channels. In this process, agents generally do not provide original agreements and contracts to the migrant workers and send them through unrecorded routes. In this process, even if migrants successfully land in the destination countries, they remain undocumented. In such cases, they will experience difficulties in receiving legal and institutional support from the government agencies of Nepal (Bashyal, 2019).

As per the preliminary report of the 2021 census, out of total population, 2.1 million of Nepalese are still abroad. While the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has so far approved 110 countries as labor migration destinations for Nepalis, it is estimated that

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One of the main reasons for the decrease in issuance of labor permits after 2013/14 was the "Free Visa Free Ticket" policy introduced in June 2015, which made the employer in the destination countries liable to pay all the recruitment expenses, airfares, visa fees and medical examination fees of migrant workers. This policy especially hit the migration to Malaysia the hardest, as Malaysian employers were reluctant to bear the expenses of Nepali workers. The steep fall in labor demand from Malaysia resulted in a surge in Nepali labor supply in the GCC countries, which decreased the bargaining power of Nepali workers going to these countries. Similarly, the restrictions imposed time and again on women going abroad as domestic help heavily affected the mobility of women migrant various countries. Moreover, the existing Foreign Employment Act and Regulations has failed to incorporate the latest developments in foreign employment. The foreign employment agencies to submit original labor demand letters, get the demands attested from the Nepali embassies in destination countries, and present numerous other documents, has made formal foreign employment procedures a hassle.

The Government has instituted a "free visa free ticket" scheme whereby employers are to bear the visa and air travel expenses for workers going for employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Malaysia. Its intent is to ease the financial burden of migrants and to make migration for employment more readily accessible to aspiring labor migrants. The worker would only pay for medical tests, orientation training and a service fee to the recruitment agency. However, the 56th Annual Report of the Auditor General has raised concerns that the scheme's implementation and monitoring has not been successful and that migrant workers are still paying significant amounts to recruiting agencies. In August 2017, public interest litigation was brought in the Supreme Court of Nepal demanding effective implementation of the scheme. In January 2019 the Court issued a directive to the government to take measures to be able to effectively implement the scheme. To date however, the scheme is still not being effectively implemented. Over the nine fiscal years from 2008/2009 to 2016/2017, Nepali labour migrants obtained permits to work in 153 different countries. The total number of labour permits issued every fiscal year from 2008/2009 to 2018/2019.

**Table 5: Total no. of Labour work Permits since 2008-2019**

Years	No. of Labour work permits
2008/09	221427

2009/10	294094
2010/11	354716
2011/12	384665
2012/13	450889
2013/14	519638
2014/15	403693
2015/16	499102
2016/17	383493
2017/18	354082
2018/19	236211

Source: DoFE, 2020.

The DoFE data show that a total of 236,211 labour permits were issued in the FY 2018/2019, with overwhelming majority of them (91.3%) being issued to males and the remaining (8.7%) to females. Table 8 shows the number of permits issued during this period by country and the sex of the migrant worker. Data confirm that Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Malaysia are the popular destinations for Nepali migrant workers, though the order may be different over the period of time. As shown in Table 5.3, nearly one-third (31.8%) of all permits are issued to labour migrants going to Qatar, followed by the United Arab Emirates (26.6%), Saudi Arabia (19.6%), Kuwait (6.8%) and Malaysia (4.2%). Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are the most popular destinations in 2019, together comprising 58 per cent of the total number of permits issued.

#### **Impact of COVID-19 on the spending of Nepali Migrants**

The spending of migrant workers further dampened in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the lockdown enforced in March 2020, the Government of Nepal completely suspended the issuance of labor permits until July 2020. This brought recruitment of migrant workers to a complete halt. Despite an increase in demand for labor from countries like Malaysia, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Romania, Jordan and Hong Kong, workers could not be deployed due to the suspension of labor permit issuance and grounding of international flights. Nevertheless, as COVID-19 restrictions were loosened and international flights resumed, labor migration got back to pre-COVID-19 levels.

Nepal had been slowly dwindling post the 2013/14 peak, the demand for migrant workers in major destinations like the GCC countries, Malaysia, Japan and South Korea is not likely to go down in the near future. The economic outlook of these countries looks positive as their post COVID-19 recovery plans to boost economic activities seems promising along with plans for mega infrastructure projects lined up. While the rise in oil prices has aided the economic recovery of GCC countries, the non-oil sectors such as tourism, transportation, manufacturing, retail and entertainment sectors have also grown immensely in these countries. For example, in Qatar, where a huge number of Nepali migrants work, it was speculated that demand for migrants would slightly decrease after the end of the 2022 Qatar World Cup. However, Qatar still has quite a lot of projects such as the Qatar Vision 2030 and the Asian Games in 2030, that will need new infrastructure in terms of stadiums, metro and train services. Therefore, it would still require migrant labour to accomplish such projects. Similarly, the GCC countries are now aiming to reduce their dependence on oil, and are moving towards developing new sectors like tourism, manufacturing and technology. Thus, the demand for skilled migrant workers can be expected to go up. Likewise, as the workforce of Japan and South Korea ages rapidly, they would be heavily dependent on migrant labor in sectors like

agriculture, manufacturing and construction, which is why opportunities for Nepali workers might increase in the future.

The current net migration rate for Nepal in 2022 is 4.353 per 1000 population, a 19.72 percent increase from 2021. The net migration rate for Nepal in 2021 was 3.636 per 1000 population, a 24.52 percent increase from 2020. The net migration rate for Nepal in 2020 was 2.920 per 1000 population, a 32.55 percent increase from 2019. The net migration rate for Nepal in 2019 was 2.203 per 1000 population, a 48.25 percent increase from 2018.

### Conclusions

The foreign migrant workers to the homeland by the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the household workloads the financial problems day by day, when they were staying in foreign countries improving their economic status from household to community basis level. The demand for Nepali labor abroad may be steady, the lack of adequate policies to facilitate migrant workers, the existing bureaucratic bottlenecks and political deadlocks within Nepal remains a challenge. Nepal should also work on expediting Government-to-Government (G2G) labor agreements with new destination countries in order to ensure fair treatment of migrant workers along with adequate remuneration and benefits. Nepal currently only has labor agreements under the G2G model with Israel and South Korea. Likewise, the Government of Nepal also should focus on making sure that Nepali migrant workers receive the required skills and knowledge before going for foreign employment, to ensure higher paying jobs that match the skills.

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