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Negotiated and Involuntary Return: COVID-19 Pandemic and Return Migration of Bangladeshi Temporary Labour Migrant Men

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Abstract

This paper investigates return migration of Bangladeshi temporary labour migrant men in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a case study of Bangladeshi migrants, who are mostly occupied in low and semi-skilled labour-intensive markets in the Middle East and the Southeast Asian countries, this paper assesses the relational aspect between pandemic and return. It discusses the underlying reasons of pandemic induced return which is based on a fieldwork, conducted in 2021, with the Bangladeshi returnee migrants. It argues that migrant receiving states' exploitative policies–burgeoning labour market nationalisation and lack of social and legal protection mechanisms–are the overriding reasons of return, rather than the pandemic. Whilst the pandemic intensified these existing exclusionary policies, this paper depicts how the migrants conform to the policies of migrant receiving states through rigid visa regime, heightened labour market immobility, retrenchment, and wage theft, which resulted in return migration.

Keywords: *COVID-19; nationalisation; social protection; return migration; Bangladesh*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of human mobilities, including international migration. In addition to the mobility restriction, the pandemic has engendered not only a health crisis but also an economic crisis around the world. Following the crises, a number of Bangladeshi temporary labour migrant men from the Middle East and the Southeast Asian countries returned to Bangladesh. Return is a mandatory part of the temporary labour migration scheme. Nevertheless, the pandemic has generated *en masse* outflows of migrant workers from migrant receiving states. As a part of this process, massive return migration in the midst of the pandemic became a common scenario for Bangladesh from April to December in 2020. As return is embedded with the nature of the temporary labour migration scheme, there can be massive return migration at any time (Mahmood, 1991).

In this context, there have been considerable discussions lately both in academia and the policy arena about the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on migration. It is claimed that the pandemic has adversely impacted remittances on various levels (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021), yet highly disregarded the plight of temporary labour migrants related to their return migration. Correspondingly, what followed was a flurry of reports and literatures on pandemic induced return migration due to risk of abuse or rights violation of migrants (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020), closure of the migrant labour intensive sectors such as construction and manufacturing (Menon & Vadakepat, 2021), lack of relief packages for migrant workers in the receiving states (Zeeshan & Sultana, 2020), and increased crackdown

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on migrant workers (Ranjan & Arokkiaraj, 2022). Such publications, however, do not offer a deeper examination on the underlying reasons of migrants' return during the pandemic. On the other hand, while some reports illustrated pandemic induced return in terms of large-scale return, forced return, and return of stranded migrants (Coz & Newland, 2021), others demonstrate return due to border restrictions, visa programme disruptions, limited or no flights, and increased vulnerability (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Such expositions are unsatisfactory because they do not peruse the role of laws and policies of the migrant receiving states, which actually intensified large scale return migration during the pandemic.

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 as pandemic in March 2020, states have taken necessary steps to control the spread of the virus. These include strict lockdowns, social distancing on the one hand; and border closure and economic shutdown on the other hand. The enforcement of these kinds of measures led to an economic crisis in the host states, which resulted in a devastating blow on the lives of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Being a major source country, Bangladesh has a significant number of migrant workers in different parts of the world, who mostly occupy low and semi-skilled labour-intensive jobs which are generally considered as '3D' (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) jobs. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) official statistics, an estimated 700,159 migrant workers were employed in 2019, but the employment of migrant workers significantly plummeted in 2020 owing to the pandemic. As migrants returned to Bangladesh mostly from the Middle East and the Southeast Asian countries, the number of migrants decreased to only 217,669 in 2020.

Given the nature of the employment, migrants are vulnerable to exploitation on various levels from their departure to return. In addition to their existing vulnerability and exploitation, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted on migrant workers' lives and livelihoods, including not only high exposure to the virus but also precarious socioeconomic conditions (Suhardiman, et al., 2020). As a result, Bangladeshi migrants, living in the Middle Eastern countries, returned to Bangladesh even though they had valid visas and job contracts (Morad, Rabby, Sacchetto, & Haque, 2022). Furthermore, the returnee migrants experienced social stigma and harassment, in terms of labeling as virus carriers, stereotyping, separation from families and relatives, status loss, and discrimination upon their return (Parvez, 2021).

Government reports demonstrated that an estimated 376,000 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh from April to December in 2020 mostly from Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Jordan, and also from Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore (Mahmud, 2021). Recent research shows that the pandemic has posed a range of difficulties on Bangladeshi migrant workers in the receiving states, including unemployment, poor living quality, isolation, social and racial discrimination, mental pressures, and financial crisis (Karim, Islam, & Talukder, 2020). Nevertheless, migrants aspired to stay, but they did not have the capability to do so without the support from the receiving states (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). These difficulties are endogenous to the long-standing migration laws and policies of migrant receiving states, which resulted in involuntary return during the pandemic.

Bangladeshi migrants encountered massive return migration several times over the last three decades, for instance during the Gulf war in 1990-91, Asian financial crisis in 1997, the global financial crisis in 2008 and COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 respectively. Because of the lack of statistical data on return migration, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of returnee

migrants. The political crisis in the Gulf region, which has resulted in the outbreak of Gulf war, led to the massive inflows of migrant workers in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh, along with the assistance of Saudi Arabia and International Organization of Migration (IOM), repatriated a massive number of migrant workers (Hossain, 1997). During the Asian financial crisis, Malaysia's decision to retrench one million expats forced the Bangladeshi migrants to return home what has been termed as 'forced repatriation' of migrant workers (Ahmed, 1998) Similarly, during the global financial crises, a massive number of migrant workers returned in 2008-09.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to explore the underlying reasons of the COVID-19 pandemic induced return migration of Bangladeshi migrants, which is not uncommon but different from what has been discussed above. It examines the context specific reasons of the return migration of Bangladeshi temporary labour migrant men and how the labour migration laws and policies of the receiving states intensified return migration during the pandemic.

The methodological approach of this paper is based on the interpretive social research to collect narratives about the return. This is based on fieldwork including qualitative interviewing, two focus group discussions with twelve returnee migrants, life history of the migrants about their migration trajectories, and interviews with key informants. Interviews ran for eighty to ninety minutes each. The interviews were conducted in Bengali, and later transcribed and translated into English. The confidentiality of the respondents–as fifteen returnee migrants were interviewed based on snowball sampling– was maintained by using pseudonyms.

This paper starts with a brief introduction which provides the history and the present context of the return migration of Bangladeshi migrants. After a brief discussion on the conceptual and theoretical, and empirical aspects of return migration, this paper delves into the return dynamics of Bangladeshi migrants in the midst of the pandemic. Later, it analyses the underlying reasons of return of the Bangladeshi migrants. The concluding section argues that albeit the pandemic intensified the return migration, the overriding reasons are the nationalisation of the labour market and the lack of social and legal protection mechanisms for migrant workers, which are rooted in the longstanding exclusionary labour migration policies of migrant receiving states.

Overview of return migration: Conceptual, theoretical and empirical reflections

Although return migration is considered as a neglected aspect in migration literature (King, 1978), the concept of return migration dates back to Ravenstein's 'fourth law of migration' where it is noted that: "each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current" (Ravenstein, 1885, p. 199). This implies that migration trajectories have both inflows and outflows. Earlier studies on return migration explored through a wide variety of academic disciplines, but sociological perspective dominated most of the research (Bovenkerk, 1974). Hence, the latest literature on return migration have focused on a wide range of issues given the complexities and dynamics of return migration have gained attention in recent years. As there is terminological disarray regarding the concept of return migration, scholars have provided several definitions of return migration, but no single definition can cover context specificity of a particular return migration phenomenon. In other words, return migration relies on not only people's own systems of meaning and experiences (Long & Oxfeld, 2004),

but also on the nature of particular migration schemes. Return implies migrants' permanent resettlement–which is cross-cultural in nature– the home country after finishing the migration cycle (Gmelch, 1980). Again, in other contexts, only the first time return to the country of origin after emigration is regarded as return migration, whilst other types of return would be considered as transilient migration, re-emigration, circular migration and so on (Bovenkerk, 1974). Pursuing such arguments, the return of Bangladeshi migrants implies the movement of migrants back to their country of origin due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It may occur in different forms such as return visit, temporary return, permanent return.

There are several major theoretical paradigms of migration studies–neoclassical economics, new economics of labor migration (NELM), structural approach, transnationalism, and social network theory–which have different explanations on the phenomenon of return migration. (Cassarino, 2004). Whilst neoclassical economics explains return as individual migrant's failure, the new economics of labor migration opines return as a successful calculated strategy of migrants. However, these approaches consider only economic factors of return, and disregard the non- economic factors of return migration. In the context of Bangladeshi migrants, although return is embedded in the migration schemes, multiple factors can lead to migrants' return. Nevertheless, pandemic induced return is neither migrants' individual failure nor calculated strategy, rather the exclusionary policies of receiving states determine the return migration. On the other hand, the structural approach argues that the social and institutional factors of the country of origin engender return migration. Transnationalism defines return as a part of broader economic, social and cultural links between migrants' country of origin and receiving state, and due to unsuccessful return experience, migrants tend to settle permanently abroad (Carling & Erdal, 2014); nevertheless, for Bangladeshi migrants, there exists no such provision although countries in Europe provided such options to the temporary labour migrants under the 'guest workers' program (Castles, 1986). Another theoretical framework, social network theory, emphasises on family and social networks which influence the decision of return. Bangladeshi migrants mobilize their networks–both material and non-material–when they caught up in the detention centres to return home; however, the broader aspect of involuntary return is more complex as it is associated with conflicting motivations, loss of income, and hence, the migrants left with no other options other than return (Mencutek, 2022). Hence, it is evident that all of the major theories provide insufficient arguments on return migration in relation to labour migration policies of the receiving countries.

Empirical studies on return migration have demonstrated that return occurs due to neoliberal globalization (Spitzer & Piper, 2014), level of success of individual migrants in the receiving states (Bastia, 2011) and the willful decision making of migrants (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007). In the European context, restrictive migration policy does not always lead to return migration because return, for Senegalese migrants, is subject to the possibility of re-migration (Flahaux, 2017). On the other hand, both the policies of the country of origin and the receiving country determine the return migration of Moroccan migrants living in Italy (Paparusso & Ambrosetti, 2017). Hence, return is a complex process, and competing theories can play only a complementary role in explaining the phenomenon of return migration (de Haas, Fokkema , & Fihri , 2015). Besides, a gender perspective of return migration often conjures up with the experience of women (King & Lulle, 2022) whose return is associated with reproductive and care responsibilities to the left behind families at home (Martínez-Buján, 2019); nevertheless, broad literatures on return migration turn a blind eye to the experience of men.

Multiple constellations of return during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The case of Bangladeshi temporary labour migrant men

Return migration is a heterogeneous phenomenon in a sense that there are various reasons of return migration. In-depth interviews with the respondents explored that the pandemic has indirectly induced the return of the migrant workers. There were three recurring issues that emerged from the migrants' experience of their return due to the pandemic: (a) rigid visa regime, (b) heightened labor market immobility, and (c) retrenchment and wage theft. These situations engendered migrants' involuntary return, but this does not necessarily imply that these situations were independent events, rather these were highly concomitant and overlapping.

Rigid visa regime

During the discussions with the returnee migrants, a recurring issue was related to the visa renewal in the receiving country during the pandemic. Many respondents, if not all, migrated through informal channels such as '*dalals*' (middleman who facilitates migration). For this reason, it was the responsibility of *'dalals'* to renew their visa. On the other hand, migrants, in some cases, lacked knowledge about the legal visa renewal process due to their education and language skills. One interviewee, Raja, who was employed in Saudi Arabia, argued that because of the pandemic, visa renewal fee was more than doubled. In his words, *"the main reason for my return was related to the work permit card. It required 60,000 BDT to renew it, but because of the pandemic it required 1,80,000 BDT. Due to the pandemic, my 'dalal' increased the visa price. I did not have enough money, and if I had not renewed my visa, it would have been illegal."* Migrants had to renew work permit cards after a certain period of time (generally after one or two years). However, it is issued by the recruitment agencies in which migrants are entitled to. Unlike other companies in Saudi Arabia, Raja's company did not have the responsibility to renew his visa. However, the *'dalal'*, together with the recruitment agency, increased the renewal price. Therefore, he could not afford it, and returned. This visa renewal fiasco led to massive return migration from the Middle East and the Southeast Asian countries to Bangladesh.

One of the most common strategies of migrants, whether in the Middle Eastern or the Southeast Asian countries, was to work clandestinely when they failed to renew their visas. Many returnee migrants, who worked in Malaysia, did not have a visa at all. One respondent explained saying, *"I went on a tourist visa, but I did not have a visa at all, you know, because my passport pages were ripped off by my agency upon my arrival in Malaysia."* Recruitment agencies ripped off the passport pages because the tourist visa was valid only for fifteen days, as per one of the interviewees. After entering Malaysia, they managed employment through recruitment agencies without legal documents and visas. As a result, migrants worked clandestinely in various sectors with a very low amount of salary. The reason was, as most migrants expressed, that they tried to go in a legal way in the first place, but they often failed after investing huge amounts of time and money. For this reason, they went on a tourist visa. The situation had changed when the pandemic affected the migrant intensive employment sectors. Many migrants faced deportation because either they did not have visas at all, or their visas had expired. Munna, who had been deported by the Malaysian government during this pandemic, explained, *"I worked in an agriculture farm without a visa (as he went on a tourist visa which expired in 2019). It was not a problem until the pandemic. Police raids were increased in the migrants' area during the lockdown time. So, one day when I was returning from my workplace, the police caught me as I had no visa. I*

had been in jail for 3 months and then one month in a police cantonment." Munna's notion explains that the pandemic has heightened the problems regarding the visa renewal as well as the return itself because international flights were postponed during that time. He returned in December after spending around four months of deportation period. He further explained that the deportation period was three months in general, but he had to stay another month in a cantonment because he failed to contact his agency and family.

Apart from the issue of visa renewal, migrants had to pay upfront money to their companies to return home as their employers did not allow them to come home. This kind of upfront payment was regarded as a security which ensured that the migrant would come in future. In most cases, migrants were exploited by the agencies on various levels during the pandemic. Therefore, many migrants had to return to Bangladesh because of visa related hurdles.

Heightened labour market immobility

Another migrant, Abir –who worked as a labourer in a Korean company based in Iraq– lost his job in August 2020. In his words, *"I worked in a canteen section. [...] The first couple of months (in Iraq) went well because I got my salary. I heard about coronavirus from my boss, and he said that it was contagious, so I stayed in my dormitory. After five months, I got notice from the manager that the company would be laid off. So, they cut off the labourer. I did not have any other option but to return home."* This implies that the migrants did not have labour market mobility in the receiving states. As they were entitled to a particular agency, they did not have the option to switch jobs in another company. On the other hand, the visa regime in the receiving states was designed in a particular way so that the migrants could not change companies easily. Besides, recruitment agencies confiscate passports and other legal documents of the migrants. Because of these reasons, it was quite difficult for the migrants to cope up with the pandemic situation.

Migrants expressed that, in difficult situations, they ran away from the company. In contrast, as they were in lockdown, they could not escape from their places. One of the most common strategies of migrants is that they often work irregularly when they fail to renew the work permit. As one respondent explained that they managed to find another job with the help of fellow migrants. Nevertheless, their strategy did not work out during the pandemic. One respondent explained, *"I first came to Saudi Arabia in 2016, and after working one year, I failed to renew my work permit because I did not have enough money. I was irregular but, at that time, I somehow managed to find another job. Later, I renewed my work permit although I was fined by the authorities. During the COVID-19 situations, everything was different. Everyone was scared because of the lockdown and there was no scope as I always had to stay in the hostel."* On the other hand, their clandestine mobility was monitored by the government because there were strict lockdowns and police raids were increased in the migrant neighbourhoods.

Returnees from the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries have been the victim of widespread detention prior to their return (Rashid, Jahid, & Nasrin, 2021). One of the migrants, who was deported from Malaysia, explained, *"I was caught by the police as I was undocumented in the lockdown period. When I was in jail, I was not allowed to make phone calls. Even no visitors were allowed for me. My khalu (maternal uncle) came to visit me in the jail but he was not allowed to meet with me. But Indonesian migrants could make phone calls to their home or agency. They were released soon after they were arrested. Their country is strong, but Bangladesh is not like that."* For other respondents who were deported from Malaysia, the situation was not different. Even the Bangladesh embassy did not help them during the pandemic, according to the respondents.

Having been caught up in a detention center, migrants were unable to contact their agency on the one hand, and they could not reach the embassy officials on the other hand. For this reason, their detention period had been increased, and return was uncertain. Nevertheless, when they managed to contact their family or agency through some other detainee migrants, they returned to Bangladesh through self-finance.

Retrenchment and wage theft

Returnees from the Middle East expressed that they were betrayed by their companies during the pandemic. There were at least two types of returnees from the Middle East, for instance, returnee who works under a transnational company in the host state and returnee who works under a local company, according to the respondents. However, both types of migrants lost their jobs during this pandemic. This is either because the company went bankrupt, or the government made the company retrench foreigners to recruit citizens. One of the respondents explained, *"I got eight months' salary without working in the pandemic. But tell me one thing: how could a company run during a lockdown. For this reason, the company sent us to Bangladesh. They said that if the company opened someday in the future only then we could go, otherwise not."* This implied the asymmetrical power relationships between the agencies and the migrant workers. Besides, migrants were considered a disposable product because the agencies had the power to retrench them at any time without any prior notice and compensation. On the other hand, many migrants had been victims of wage theft. This is one of the most common reasons of return.

Minhaj, a labour migrant who worked at a gas plant in Oman, explained that he came back to Bangladesh due to the financial difficulties that he had faced in Oman. He further explained, *"the agency did not provide salary during the pandemic. My 'dalal' said that I would get the salary within 45 days, but I got the salary after five months. The agency provided food only, and I took my pocket money from home. I did not get my full salary, and I am yet to be paid like 300,000 BDT. Although I have a valid work permit now, I would not go back to Oman. Currently, I am preparing to go to Croatia. I heard from my 'dalal' that the situation in Croatia is not as bad as in Oman."* Because of his experience, Minhaj's migration trajectories changed towards Europe. Most of the migrants expressed that they facilitated their migration journey through debt. Another migrant, Aziz, explained that he had mortgaged his lands before he went to Malaysia. He went on a tourist visa and worked there irregularly. In his words, "*I mortgaged my lands which is equal to 3,00,000 to 3,50,000 BDT. I had gone there with much hope but now all went in vain. I returned empty-handed. I am yet to be paid like 1500 ringgit. As I did not work as per their terms, and left that company, they caught me to the police."* This scenario indicates that wage theft made the migrants vulnerable during the pandemic. As he had no legal documents, he was deported by the government later on. Many migrants expressed that they could not raise their voice to demand their salary because they were undocumented. Therefore, they could not make litigation against their employers. As migrants had been caught up in the jails, they were unable to send money to their families. This led to detrimental impact not only on migrant financial activities relating to their cost of return but also on the families of migrants back in the home state, who did not get remittances from the migrants. However, he expressed that being a deportee, he could not avail the support from his agency. As a result, he returned home through self-finance, which engendered a debt trap for the migrants back in their home country, and heightened the migrant families' economic vulnerability as they returned empty-handed.

Analysis

Political analysts suggest that the pandemic would spread nationalist sentiments around the world (Allen, et al., 2020). This would also affect the temporary labour migration regime as well–especially the policies of migrant receiving states. Migrant receiving states have taken a lot of steps to nationalise its labour markets amidst the pandemic. For instance, the government of Kuwait passed the 'Demographic Imbalance Bill' in late 2020, which will impose quotas on migrant workers. As a result, Bangladesh must repatriate more than 200,000 expatriates from Kuwait, according to the quota (Mahmud & Hasan, 2020). Moreover, earlier in 2020, Kuwait announced an amnesty program for undocumented migrants, which is also a part of market nationalisation aimed at decreasing the number of foreign workers. Amnesty programmes are very common phenomenon in the Middle East. From 2004 to 2018, Middle Eastern countries declared nineteen amnesty programmes which were designed to protect national identity against demographic imbalance, to reduce the number of migrant workers, and to ensure migrants' adherence to the new labour laws (Connell, 2019). Similarly, Oman announced amnesty programmes in 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2019 respectively to curb the number of migrant workers, and the 2019 amnesty has been extended because of the pandemic to reduce the number of expatriates (Ashok, 2021). Besides, the policy of Saudization, which is known as *'nitaqat',* was adopted in 2011 to decrease the migrant workers in the private sector (Hussain, 2020)**.** The recent 'Labour Reform Initiative' in 2020 and the *'nitaqat'* policy are designed to achieve Saudi vision 2030, which is aimed to nationalise the labour market.

On the other hand, the labour immigration policy of Malaysia, which is based on the 'Employment Act of 1955', is a nationalist policy in its origin because section 60M and 60N outline that citizens must be given preference over migrant workers. The recruitment and termination of migrant workers will be based on 'reason of redundancy'– which implies that the employers must retrench foreign workers first, instead of citizens. On the eve of the global financial crisis in 2008-09, the Malaysian government introduced a new policy– 'foreign workers first out' (FWFO)– which led to massive retrenchment and return of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Given the nature of private sector management of migration, the Malaysian government forced the employers to cut off foreigners from jobs, and to recruit nationals in the midst of economic crisis (Sario, 2009). On the other hand, employers encourage or force the migrants to return home (Chang , 2014). Whilst the government of Malaysia attempts to justify its 'FWFO' policy based on the 'Employment Act of 1955', the very act itself is discriminatory against migrant workers.

As states' social protection mechanisms are often designed for citizens, migrant workers are excluded from such provisions. Many migrant receiving states have laws relating to minimum wage, work hours and work conditions, but given the nature of employment, these laws do not cover the social protection of migrant workers (Hennebry, 2014). The lack of social protection mechanisms is highly visible during the pandemic. For instance, the stimulus packages, announced by the Malaysian government during the pandemic, exclude migrant workers. Moreover, the lack of social protection mechanism has enduring consequences on migrant workers because it not only excluded them from social security but also from health security provisions during the pandemic. For instance, migrant workers in Singapore are entitled to healthcare by their employers, but excluded from the national universal health coverage (Rajaraman, Yip, Kuan , & Lim , 2020). Besides, migrants, who had been in the

detention centres, faced health risks associated with the COVID-19 because the authorities did not follow the COVID-19 health regulations in the camps.

Apart from the national laws, many international bodies have treaties and conventions relating to the protection of migrant workers for ensuring human rights of the migrants. For instance, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, an intergovernmental agreement signed in 2018, emphasised on international cooperation for safe and dignified return of migrant workers. However, most of the treaties are 'non-binding' in nature, and hence, migrant workers remain vulnerable because the international bodies do not have enforcement mechanisms over the states' authority. On the other hand, most of the migrant receiving states have not ratified the treaties which ensure migrants' protection. For instance, 'International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families', which is the United Nations' multilateral treaty on the protection of migrant workers, signed in 1990. Although Bangladesh ratified this treaty, many migrant receiving states–including the Middle Eastern and the Southeast Asian countries– have not ratified it yet. Following the ratification, the Bangladesh government adopted 'Overseas Employment Act' in 2013 to protect migrant workers' rights in pre-departure and post-departure period. According to the law, the mission of Bangladesh in the migrant receiving states is responsible to oversee the conditions of the work, to provide annual reports, and to provide legal assistance to migrant workers. In other words, Bangladesh does not have any authoritative power to ensure the rights of migrant workers in the receiving states. However, because of the lack of legal protection mechanisms, migrants, who faced retrenchment and wage theft, could not claim their wages and returned empty handed. Besides, migrants' legal protection would not be ensured until the existing asymmetric power relation between the employers and migrants remains. For these reasons, this non-assimilationist labour immigration policy is often termed as 'xenophobic' (Ullah, Lee, Hassan, & Nawaz, 2020).

Conclusion

Return is the essential feature of the temporary labour migration scheme. Thus, since the start of their migration trajectories, Bangladeshi migrants plan their return migration which is subjectively constructed, and based on individual decision-making (Dannecker, 2005); however, the pandemic induced return is negotiated and involuntary in nature. Notwithstanding these limitations, this paper has argued that due to the myriad of reasons stemming from the long-standing migration laws and policies of the receiving states led to the return migration during the pandemic.

The most obvious findings emerge from the narratives of Bangladeshi migrants, who provide the reasons of their return. Some migrants are trapped in visa related hurdles, lacking access to switch jobs, and more generally, victims of retrenchment and wage theft. Despite the several kinds of impediments imposed by the receiving states, the power of migrants' resistance provides them to find alternative solutions including migrating to another country or staying by utilizing other means, rather than return migration (Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2021); however, the findings of this research have manifested how migrants have conformed to the policies of the receiving states as they were locked up under lockdown (Ullah, Nawaz, & Chattoraj, 2021).

Policymakers of receiving states regard return as a win-win scenario for all the actors involved including the migrant workers (Sinatti, 2015), but the restrictive laws and policies highly

disregard human rights of migrant workers as well as international agreements. Hence, the pandemic induced return highlights the existing fault lines of the temporary labour migration scheme. These findings add to the rapidly expanding field on return migration which argues that due to transnational ties, migrants tend to remigrate upon their return, which cyclical rather than permanent (Bilecen, 2022); nevertheless, pandemic induced return, for my interlocutors, resulted in either permanent return or their migration trajectories have changed because of the migrant receiving states' policies of labour market nationalisation and lack of social and legal protection mechanisms.

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