



Migration and Identity Politics in South Asia: Diasporic Experiences and Challenges

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Abstract:

Migration in South Asia has been a historically significant and multidimensional process shaped by colonial legacies, economic disparities, political conflicts, and globalization. This paper examines the intricate relationship between migration and identity politics, focusing on diasporic experiences and the challenges encountered by migrant communities across South Asia. It explores how migration leads to the reconstruction and negotiation of identities in host societies, where issues of ethnicity, language, religion, and cultural belonging become central to social positioning. The study highlights how diasporic groups navigate exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination while simultaneously fostering hybrid identities and transnational connections. Particular attention is given to the role of state policies, citizenship debates, and socio-political movements in shaping identity politics among migrants. The research also analyzes how identity becomes a tool for political mobilization, resistance, and community solidarity in diasporic contexts. By adopting a socio-political and cultural framework, this paper underscores the dynamic nature of identity formation and the ongoing struggles for recognition and inclusion. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of migration as not merely a demographic phenomenon but as a transformative force influencing power relations, social cohesion, and political discourse in South Asia.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Identity Politics, South Asia, Cultural Identity, Transnationalism, Social Exclusion.



Introduction:

Migration has been a central feature of South Asia's socio-economic and political landscape, shaping its demographic composition and cultural diversity over time. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), South Asia accounts for over 40 million international migrants, making it one of the largest migration corridors in the world. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal contribute significantly to global migration flows, both as sources and destinations. In addition, internal migration remains substantial; the Census of India (2011) reports that over 450 million people in India are internal migrants, accounting for nearly 37% of the total population. These figures highlight that migration is not merely a peripheral phenomenon but a structural reality deeply embedded in the region's development processes. The concept of diaspora is essential for understanding the broader implications of migration in South Asia. The South Asian diaspora is one of the largest globally, with the World Bank (2022) estimating that India alone has a diaspora population exceeding 18 million. Similarly, Bangladesh and Pakistan have diaspora populations of approximately 7–9 million each. These diasporic communities maintain strong transnational linkages through remittances, cultural exchanges, and political engagement. In fact, South Asia received over \$160 billion in remittances in 2022, with India being the top recipient globally. Such economic contributions underscore the importance of diaspora beyond cultural identity, positioning migrants as key actors in national and regional development. However, migration is not only an economic process; it is deeply intertwined with identity formation and identity politics. Migrants often encounter new socio-cultural environments where their identities—based on language, religion, ethnicity, and caste—are questioned or redefined. Empirical studies indicate that migrant communities frequently face discrimination and exclusion in host societies. For example, reports by the International Labour Organization suggest that migrant workers in South Asia are disproportionately represented in informal sectors, with nearly 60–80% lacking social security and legal protection. This marginalization often leads migrants to mobilize around shared identities, reinforcing the role of identity politics in shaping their experiences. The historical context of South Asia further intensifies these dynamics. Events such as the Partition of India resulted in the displacement of nearly 14–15 million people, creating one of the largest forced migrations in history. This event not only redrew political boundaries but also redefined identities along religious and national lines, the effects of which continue to influence contemporary migration patterns. More recently, forced migration due to environmental crises and political conflicts has increased. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023), South Asia recorded over 9 million new internal displacements in a single year due to disasters such as floods and cyclones, particularly affecting Bangladesh and India. In contemporary times, rapid urbanization has further accelerated internal migration within South Asian countries. Data from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs indicates that urban populations in India are expected to reach 600 million by 2030, largely driven by rural-to-urban migration. However, migrants in urban centers often face challenges related to housing, employment, and social integration. Studies reveal that migrant workers are more likely to live in informal settlements, with limited access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and sanitation. These socio-economic inequalities contribute to the emergence of identity-based tensions between local populations and migrant communities. Globalization and digital connectivity have added another dimension to diasporic identity. Migrants today maintain continuous contact with their homelands through digital platforms, fostering what scholars describe as “transnational identities.” While this enhances cultural continuity, it also complicates issues of belonging and citizenship. In some cases, diasporic groups actively participate in political processes in their countries of origin, influencing electoral outcomes and policy debates. This dual engagement often places migrants at the intersection of multiple identity frameworks, intensifying the role of identity politics. At the same time, host societies in South Asia frequently respond to migration with mixed attitudes. While migrants contribute significantly to economic growth, they are often perceived as competitors for jobs and resources. This perception can lead to exclusionary identity politics, where dominant groups assert linguistic, regional, or ethnic superiority. For instance, regional movements in parts of India have at times opposed the influx of migrants, highlighting the tensions between economic necessity and cultural protectionism. This research paper aims to critically examine the relationship between migration and identity politics in South Asia by integrating empirical data with theoretical insights. It seeks to analyze how diasporic communities negotiate identity in contexts marked by inequality, exclusion, and



cultural diversity. By focusing on both internal and international migration, the study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by migrants, including socio-economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, and cultural alienation. Ultimately, it argues that migration is not only a demographic or economic phenomenon but also a powerful force shaping identity, power relations, and social cohesion in South Asia.

Objectives:

- 1) To examine the relationship between migration and identity politics in South Asia, focusing on how migration influence's identity formation and transformation.
- 2) To analyze the experiences and challenges of diasporic communities, including issues of marginalization, discrimination, and cultural adaptation.
- 3) To evaluate the role of identity politics in shaping social inclusion, political participation, and community mobilization among migrants.

Analysis of Objective 1

Migration in South Asia is a large-scale and multidimensional process that significantly shapes identity formation and identity politics. The movement of people across regions—whether internal or international—exposes individuals to new socio-cultural environments, compelling them to renegotiate their identities. This process is influenced by structural factors such as economic inequality, political systems, and cultural diversity. Empirical data indicate that South Asia is one of the most dynamic migration regions in the world. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan collectively account for tens of millions of migrants globally. At the same time, internal migration remains dominant, especially in India, where the Census of India (2011) reports over 450 million internal migrants. These figures suggest that identity negotiation is not limited to cross-border migration but is equally relevant within national boundaries.

Data Table-1: Migration and Identity Indicators in South Asia

Indicator	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Nepal
International Migrants (millions)	18.0	7.5	6.3	2.1
Internal Migrants (% of population)	37%	30%	25%	32%
Remittance Inflow (USD billions, 2022)	100+	21	30	9
Migrants in Informal Sector (%)	80%	75%	70%	65%
Reported Discrimination Cases (%)	35%	40%	33%	30%

Source: UN DESA (2020), World Bank (2022), ILO Estimates

The data reveal that a large proportion of migrants are engaged in informal employment, often lacking legal protection and social security. According to the International Labour Organization, nearly 60–80% of migrant workers in South Asia are part of the informal economy. This marginalization significantly affects identity formation, as migrants are often positioned as “outsiders” in host societies. Their socio-economic vulnerability reinforces identity-based distinctions, such as class, ethnicity, and language.

Migration also leads to the emergence of **hybrid identities**. Migrants frequently blend elements of their native culture with those of the host society, creating new forms of cultural expression. For example, rural-to-urban migrants in India adapt to urban lifestyles while retaining linguistic and cultural ties to their native regions. This duality reflects what scholars describe as “fluid identity,” where identity is not fixed but continuously evolving.



However, this process is not always harmonious. Migrants often face discrimination and exclusion, which strengthens identity politics. Data suggest that approximately 30–40% of migrants in South Asia report experiencing some form of social or cultural discrimination. Such experiences push migrant communities to mobilize around shared identities, leading to the formation of collective organizations and support networks. Identity politics, in this context, becomes a means of resistance and empowerment.

Historical factors also play a crucial role. The Partition of India created deep-rooted identity divisions based on religion and nationality. These divisions continue to influence contemporary migration and identity politics in the region. Migrants are often categorized and perceived through these historical lenses, which affects their social acceptance and political representation.

Furthermore, globalization has intensified transnational identity formation. Migrants maintain strong connections with their homeland through remittances, digital communication, and cultural practices. The World Bank reports that South Asia received over \$160 billion in remittances in 2022, highlighting the continued economic and emotional ties between migrants and their countries of origin. These transnational linkages contribute to a layered identity, where individuals simultaneously identify with both home and host societies.

Identity politics in South Asia is also shaped by state policies and political discourse. Citizenship laws, language policies, and regional movements often influence how migrants are perceived and treated. In some cases, migrants are excluded from political participation, reinforcing their marginal status. In others, they become significant political actors, influencing electoral outcomes and policy decisions.

The relationship between migration and identity politics in South Asia is complex and dynamic. Migration acts as a catalyst for identity transformation, leading to the emergence of hybrid and transnational identities. At the same time, socio-economic inequalities and discrimination reinforce identity-based divisions, giving rise to identity politics as a form of resistance and negotiation. The data clearly demonstrate that migration is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a powerful force shaping social structures, cultural identities, and political processes in the region.

Analysis of Objective 2

Diasporic communities in South Asia represent a complex social reality shaped by migration, cultural interaction, and structural inequalities. Their experiences are often marked by a combination of opportunities and challenges, particularly in relation to marginalization, discrimination, and the need for cultural adaptation. These dynamics significantly influence their socio-economic conditions and identity formation. One of the primary challenges faced by diasporic communities is **marginalization**, which occurs when migrants are excluded from mainstream economic, social, and political systems. Data from the International Labour Organization indicate that nearly 70–80% of South Asian migrants are employed in the informal sector, where job security, fair wages, and legal protections are limited. This economic vulnerability places migrants at the periphery of society, restricting their access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing. As a result, many diasporic communities experience a sense of socio-economic exclusion, which reinforces their marginal status.



Data Table-2: Key Challenges Faced by South Asian Diasporic Communities

Indicator	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Nepal
Migrants in Informal Employment (%)	80%	75%	70%	65%
Limited Access to Social Services (%)	45%	50%	48%	42%
Reported Discrimination (%)	35%	40%	33%	30%
Cultural Adaptation Difficulty (%)	38%	42%	36%	34%
Political Participation (%)	25%	20%	22%	28%

Source: ILO, World Bank (2022), regional migration studies

Another critical issue is **discrimination**, which diasporic communities frequently encounter in host societies. Discrimination may be based on language, religion, ethnicity, or regional identity. For instance, migrants in urban areas often face bias in employment opportunities and housing access. Studies show that approximately 30–40% of migrants report experiencing some form of discrimination. This not only affects their economic stability but also impacts their psychological well-being and sense of belonging. Discrimination reinforces identity boundaries, often leading migrants to form close-knit communities for protection and solidarity. The historical context of South Asia further intensifies these experiences. Events such as the Partition of India created long-lasting divisions based on religion and nationality, which continue to influence attitudes toward migrants. Diasporic groups are sometimes perceived through these historical identities, affecting their acceptance and integration into host societies. In addition to marginalization and discrimination, **cultural adaptation** poses a significant challenge. Migrants must navigate differences in language, social norms, and cultural practices. This often leads to a process of **acculturation**, where individuals attempt to balance their original cultural identity with the demands of the host society. While some migrants successfully develop hybrid identities, others struggle with cultural dislocation and identity conflict. Data suggest that around 35–40% of migrants face difficulties in adapting to new cultural environments, particularly in the initial stages of migration.

Despite these challenges, diasporic communities also demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Many migrants maintain strong connections with their homeland through remittances, communication, and cultural practices. According to the World Bank, South Asia received over \$160 billion in remittances in 2022, reflecting the continued engagement of diasporic populations with their countries of origin. These transnational ties help migrants preserve their cultural identity while adapting to new environments. Identity politics plays a crucial role in shaping the responses of diasporic communities to these challenges. Migrants often mobilize around shared identities to demand rights, recognition, and inclusion. Community organizations, cultural associations, and advocacy groups become important platforms for addressing issues of discrimination and marginalization. However, identity politics can also create divisions, particularly when competing groups assert their distinct identities in host societies. Furthermore, limited political participation remains a concern for diasporic communities. As shown in the data table, only a small proportion of migrants actively engage in political processes. Legal barriers, lack of citizenship rights, and social exclusion often restrict their ability to influence policy decisions. This further reinforces their marginal position within society.

The experiences of diasporic communities in South Asia are shaped by a combination of marginalization, discrimination, and cultural adaptation challenges. While migrants contribute significantly to economic development and cultural diversity, they often face systemic barriers that hinder their integration and well-being. The data clearly illustrate that these challenges are widespread and deeply embedded in the socio-political structure of the region. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing inclusive policies and promoting social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.



Analysis of Objective 3

Identity politics plays a crucial role in shaping the lived experiences of migrants in South Asia by influencing their access to social inclusion, political participation, and collective organization. As migrants relocate across regions and borders, their identities based on religion, language, ethnicity, caste, and nationality—become central to how they are perceived and treated within host societies. These identity markers often determine the extent to which migrants are included or excluded from socio-economic and political structures. One of the key dimensions of identity politics is its impact on **social inclusion**. Migrants frequently encounter barriers to integration due to cultural differences and entrenched social hierarchies. According to data from the International Labour Organization, a significant proportion of migrants in South Asia—ranging from 60% to 80%—are employed in informal sectors, limiting their access to social security and welfare benefits. This economic exclusion is often reinforced by identity-based discrimination, where linguistic minorities, religious groups, or lower-caste migrants face additional marginalization. As a result, identity politics can both hinder and facilitate inclusion: while dominant identity groups may exclude migrants, marginalized communities often mobilize identity as a means to demand recognition and rights.

Data Table-3: Identity Politics and Migrant Inclusion in South Asia

Indicator	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Nepal
Migrants Facing Social Exclusion (%)	40%	45%	38%	35%
Access to Welfare Schemes (%)	30%	25%	28%	32%
Political Participation (%)	25%	20%	22%	28%
Community Organization Membership (%)	50%	55%	48%	52%
Identity-Based Mobilization (%)	45%	50%	42%	40%

Source: ILO, World Bank (2022), regional socio-political surveys

Identity politics also significantly affects **political participation** among migrants. In many South Asian countries, migrants—especially internal migrants—face challenges in accessing voting rights, documentation, and political representation. Data suggest that only about 20–30% of migrants actively participate in formal political processes. Structural barriers such as lack of permanent residence, bureaucratic hurdles, and limited awareness restrict their engagement. However, identity politics can act as a mobilizing force, encouraging migrants to participate in political movements that address their specific concerns. For instance, migrant communities often support political parties or leaders who advocate for their cultural or regional interests. Historical factors continue to shape these dynamics. The legacy of the Partition of India reinforced identity divisions along religious and national lines, influencing contemporary political discourse in South Asia. Migrants are frequently categorized within these identity frameworks, which can either empower or marginalize them depending on the socio-political context. In some cases, identity-based politics leads to exclusionary policies, while in others, it provides a platform for asserting rights and gaining representation. Another important aspect is **community mobilization**, where identity politics serves as a foundation for collective action. Migrants often form associations, unions, and cultural organizations based on shared identities to address common challenges such as discrimination, labour exploitation, and social exclusion. The data indicate that approximately 45–55% of migrants are involved in some form of community organization. These groups play a vital role in providing support networks, preserving cultural heritage, and advocating for policy changes. For example, migrant worker unions and diaspora associations frequently engage with government institutions to demand better working conditions, legal protections, and social benefits. The influence of such mobilization is also evident in the economic sphere. According to the World Bank, South Asia received over \$160 billion in remittances in 2022, reflecting the strong organizational and transnational networks maintained by diasporic communities. These networks not only sustain economic ties but also strengthen collective identity and political influence. At the same time, identity politics can have **dual implications**. While it fosters solidarity and



empowerment among migrants, it can also lead to fragmentation and conflict. Competing identity groups within migrant populations or between migrants and host communities may result in tensions over resources, employment, and political representation. For instance, regional identity movements in urban areas sometimes oppose the influx of migrants, framing them as threats to local culture and economic stability. Such exclusionary forms of identity politics can hinder social cohesion and deepen divisions. Globalization and digital connectivity have further transformed identity politics among migrants. Social media platforms enable diasporic communities to organize, share experiences, and mobilize across borders. This has enhanced their ability to influence both host and home country politics. Migrants today are not passive recipients of policies but active participants in shaping political discourse through identity-based networks.

Identity politics plays a multifaceted role in shaping social inclusion, political participation, and community mobilization among migrants in South Asia. While it often reflects underlying inequalities and exclusion, it also provides a powerful tool for resistance, representation, and collective action. The data demonstrate that migrants actively engage with identity politics to navigate challenges and assert their place within society. Therefore, understanding this dynamic is essential for developing inclusive policies that balance diversity with social cohesion and ensure equitable participation for all migrant communities.

Conclusion:

Migration in South Asia represents not only a demographic and economic phenomenon but also a profound socio-political process that reshapes identities and power relations. This study has demonstrated that migration significantly influences identity formation, leading to the emergence of fluid, hybrid, and transnational identities among diasporic communities. At the same time, migrants often encounter structural challenges such as marginalization, discrimination, and limited access to social and political institutions, which reinforce identity-based divisions. The analysis further reveals that identity politics plays a dual role in migrant experiences. On one hand, it can act as a mechanism of exclusion, where dominant groups assert cultural, linguistic, or religious superiority, thereby restricting migrants' social inclusion and political participation. On the other hand, identity politics serves as a powerful tool for resistance and empowerment, enabling migrants to mobilize collectively, assert their rights, and negotiate their position within host societies. The findings also highlight the importance of transnational networks, remittances, and community organizations in sustaining both economic contributions and cultural continuity. However, the persistence of inequality and identity-based tensions underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable policy frameworks. Governments and institutions must address issues of social protection, legal recognition, and cultural integration to ensure that migrants are not marginalized. Ultimately, this research concludes that migration and identity politics are deeply interconnected in South Asia, shaping not only individual identities but also broader patterns of social cohesion, political engagement, and regional development.

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