

**POLICIES AND
PRACTICES**

168

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December 2024



Policies and Practices 168

December 2024

Published by:
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group
IA-48, Sector-III, Ground Floor
Salt Lake City
Kolkata-700097
India
Web: <http://www.mcrg.ac.in>

ISSN 2348 0297

Printed by:
Graphic Image
New Market, New Complex, West Block
2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-87

This publication is brought out with support of The Fund For Global Human Rights. It is a Part of the research programme of the Calcutta Research Group on “ Justice, Security, and Vulnerable Populations in South Asia”

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**Human Security and Migration in South Asia:
Analysing India's Response to the Global Compact for
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Sucharita Sengupta

2024

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Introduction

Human security, which as a concept prioritises the protection of individuals from pervasive threats to their survival, livelihood, and dignity, is quite relevant in the context of migration governance, for vulnerable population groups like refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. Originally articulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its 1993 Human Development Report, that was further developed in 1994, human security expands the traditional understanding of security by shifting the focus from state-centric approaches to the well-being of individuals.¹ It promises a paradigm shift from state-centric security to individual well-being, emphasises on protecting people from chronic threats (e.g., poverty, displacement) and sudden disruptions (e.g., conflict, climate disasters). The last decades have seen a renewed thinking on the notion of “security”. Security thus became a “watchword” debated and discussed, distinguishing from the early thoughts on this of the International Security Studies (ISS) (Buzan and Hansen, Chapter 1, 2009). The delineation of the ISS thus led to critical reflections from the Critical Security Studies, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, Constructive Security. Studies and so on and the genesis of Human Security (Buzan and Hansen, 13-14, 2009). The Commission on Human Security (CHS) in its report on *Human Security Now* defines the need of Human Security “to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment.”² Human Security, thus, means protecting fundamental freedoms of humans- that are the very essence of life. “It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.” (CHS: 2003: 4). The core soul of this paper is derived from the foundational principles of Human Security and an United Nations Policy reading, which will be clarified in more detail in subsequent sections of the paper.

In South Asia—a region marked by complex migration dynamics—the concept of human security critically intersects with the aspirations of the United Nation’s “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration” (GCM). Adopted in 2018, the GCM is a non-legally binding agreement grounded with cooperative approach to optimise the overall benefits of migration. It seeks to balance state sovereignty with migrant rights, yet its implementation in South Asia, particularly India, reveals both promise and paradox. This article reflexively examines how the GCM’s

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Policies and Practices, Issue No. 168, December 2024.

framework aligns with human security imperatives in a region where migration is often informal, perilous, and politicised.

The GCM is critical in addressing the issue of security and challenges faced by migrants, whose experiences often transcend the boundaries of state sovereignty and expose them to vulnerabilities rooted in structural inequalities, legal exclusions, and socio-economic precarity. The concept of human security that is rooted in human rights and humanitarian ethos, broadens the scope of security by addressing threats to individuals' survival, development, and dignity. Unlike traditional notions of security framed through the lens of national security, human security emphasises the interconnectedness of various forms of insecurity, including economic, health, food, environmental, and personal insecurities. In the context of migration, human security provides a framework for addressing the vulnerabilities faced by migrants, such as labour exploitation, discrimination, and limited access to social security and protection.³

The conceptual framework of this paper is grounded in the concept of human security, and the dynamics of securitisation of migration in South Asia. These theoretical and analytical tools provide a foundation for understanding the intersections of migration, security, and governance in India. More specifically this paper examines the scope of UN policies like the GCM aiming for sustainable development of migrants by 2030.

This research thus reflects upon the *notion of security indexed on the concept of protection for migrants and refugees as enshrined in the global compacts*. The research then asks -what does the Global Compact for “Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) entail for vulnerable groups of population like migrants and refugees? Whether institutional paradigms of security like the global compacts that also talk of state-border security, can crystallise into human security? – and examines ground realities evincing instances from South Asia and India. This paper, however, explicitly focuses upon the GCM. The important question to ask here is whether in practice, security of migrants can be assured through the Compacts-what do contemporary instances in South Asia show? This paper thus argues there is a need to examine international conventions like the global compacts, that vow to “securitise” lives of migrants, either corroborating or in discordance of ground realities in the context of South Asia.

On 10 December 2018, the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) was adopted by 164 countries. In a first in specificity, it spoke explicitly of *human security* while addressing complexities surrounding migration and displacement. *Thus, at the heart of the global compacts is the question of security for migrants and refugees*. While, traditionally, security has been perceived through a state-centric lens prioritising national security, border control and protection of citizens, the Global Compacts recognise security as a multifaceted concept, one that encompasses the safety, dignity and well-being of all subjects living within a territory, including migrants and refugees. The GCM for improved migration governance puts migration and their human rights at the centre as both subjects and agents of development. This entails access to basic services such as healthcare, and protection from arbitrary detention and deportation. The compacts prioritise security and protection as core principles. It also recognises the reality of criminalisation of migrants and consequently, talks about the root causes of migration and provides access to fair procedures and effective protection.⁴

The steps building to the GCM promised a new orientation, giving birth to a global developmental gaze which would link “protection, safety, and security with sustainable development” (Samaddar, 2018). The idea was to make migration work for all and as scholars like Ranabir Samaddar write, how a global gaze as an apparatus of power is born and how humanitarianism works as an instrument of the global (Samaddar, 2018).

In 2022, the UN General Assembly reviewed the GCM. In regard to the review and follow up, the General Assembly in para 48-54, stated the formation of the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) which convenes every four years starting in 2022, serving as the primary global platform for discussing progress on the GCM's implementation. Additionally, regional reviews began in 2020, to set the stage for the 2020 agenda, involving sub-regional and regional organisations to inform the IMRF. Member States are encouraged to develop national implementation plans and conduct regular, inclusive progress reviews. The United Nations Network on Migration supports these efforts by assisting in organising regional reviews and collecting inputs from various levels to facilitate knowledge sharing (UN Network on Migration, n.d.). All member states were also encouraged to develop national plans for effective implementation of the GCM in their respective territories (UN Network on Migration, n.d.). The regional reviews of the GCM were conceptualised in 2022 to provide member states with the scope of a State-led discussion on GCM implementation, to foster greater regional collaboration and pave the way for the 2026 International Migration Review Forum (UN Network on Migration, n.d.).

Although the GCM focuses explicitly on migrants, it was conceived in tandem with the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR), and thus, reading them in dialogue with each other gives a comprehensive picture of the protection mechanisms mentioned in the compacts. The GCM states that it aims for sustainable development of migrants by 2030. Taking a cue from the “Kolkata Declaration”⁵ adopted in 2018 by the Calcutta Research Group after a conference on “the State of the Global Protection System for Refugees and Migrants” in November 2018, this paper intends to reflect upon the global realities and global migration governance of the day in ensuring safety, dignity, and protection of migrants in South Asia, inviting more dialogues at multiple levels- state, regional, civil society and within cities.⁶ Can institutional paradigms of security like the global compacts that also refer to state-border security, crystallise into human security? Can they provide security to Migrants? How is the GCM helping and where are the gaps? This paper will address some of these questions and situate human security within the broader framework of migration governance, linking it to the principles of the GCM and emphasising on the need for policies that are inclusive, rights-based, and contextually grounded.

GCM and Implications for South Asia?

South Asia is important in the discussion for several reasons. The entire region is known to be a core source of intra and inter-state migration.⁷ Migration both within and from the region is a constant. During the pandemic, figures escalated and in mid-year 2020, an estimated 13.9 million international migrants resided in the sub-region of which 10.9 million were from within the region.⁸ ‘Irregular migration’ in the sub-continent is common, often facilitated by trafficking and smuggling networks. Over 13 million Indian migrants work abroad (MEA India 2022, 5) yet pre-departure training (GCM Objective 3) remains inconsistent (Ruhs 2021, 34). Thus, categories get conflated. There are widespread guess estimates of the numbers of undocumented migrants from the sub-continent in Malaysia, other Southeast Asian countries, Gulf States, Europe, and USA. Trafficking remains an issue, for example, India and Pakistan are zones of origin, transit and destination of trafficked women, children, and bonded labour, as per data given by IOM and UNESCO.⁹ Cross-border flows, such as India-Bangladesh movements, face politicisation despite economic interdependence (Samaddar 2020, 45). Besides being home to a large number of refugees, and internally displaced

persons (IDP), South Asia is also important for international labour migration particularly to the Gulf Countries. Pre-covid estimates indicate that emigrants from South Asia had sent 20 percent of all remittances to their countries of origin in 2019.¹⁰

Since South Asia comprises some of the World's most disaster-prone areas, the number of people at risk of displacement due to the climate or environmental disasters is also high.¹¹ Against this background, although the GCM seeks to make migration human rights centric, gender responsive and child sensitive, how much that is getting implemented on ground in the region is still debatable. Five major South Asian countries – India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka adopted the GCM in December 2018.¹² Fluid borders between these countries both accentuate inter-country migration for example between India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.¹³ The South Asian Regional Trade Union (SARTUC) reviewed the scenario in the five countries that have adopted the GCM and concluded that South Asian migrant workers still face widespread discrepancy. There are also significant barriers to safe and orderly migration of migrants stemming out from political tensions. For instance, India-Pakistan tension hindered SAARC's migration dialogue (Kondapalli 2021, 22). As a result, informal networks grow and unregulated brokers dominate recruitment, contravening GCM Objective 10 (Rajan and Saxena 2021, 56). Trafficking and abuse plague irregular migrants, with South Asia accounting for 40% of global trafficking victims (UNODC 2020, 9). Climate-induced displacement in Bangladesh and India's Sundarbans forces unplanned migration, displacing 1.5 million annually (IPCC 2022, 15). The GCM's Objective 5 (enhancing legal pathways) responds to these issues but struggles with enforceability in fragmented governance systems (Newland 2020, 8).

The pandemic has further revealed serious protection gaps in these countries, especially the social protection deficits experienced by migrant workers who have lost their jobs, incomes, and support systems, in particular those working in irregular situations.¹⁴ India's 139 million internal migrants (Census of India 2011) were excluded from COVID-19 relief, violating GCM Objective 14 (ILO 2020, 20). Regional organisations like South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) mentions the need to implement GCM but nothing concrete is available on how this could be done. Similarly, other regional organisations like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) mention migration and the need to enhance cooperation among states in the region¹⁵ but again nothing concrete has emerged from the discussions yet. Ample contemporary instances in fact indicate a contrasting picture. Over 13 million Indian migrants work abroad (MEA India 2022, 5), yet pre-departure training (GCM Objective 3) remains inconsistent (Ruhs 2021, 34). Coordination between UN agencies responsible for effectively implementing the GCM and regional organisations mentioned above or coordination with concerned governments remain weak in South Asia.¹⁶

Overview of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and its Significance in Addressing Migrants' Security

The GCM represents the first intergovernmental agreement to address the notion of security in the process of migration comprehensively on a global scale. Guided by the principles of state sovereignty, shared responsibility, and human rights, the GCM establishes a cooperative framework for managing migration in a manner that prioritises safety, dignity, and development. While the

Compact is non-binding, its 23 objectives provide actionable strategies for enhancing migration governance, protecting migrant rights, and fostering international collaboration. For India, the GCM offers a unique opportunity to align its migration policies with global standards while addressing the vulnerabilities faced by its diverse migrant populations.¹⁷

The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) thus emerges as a crucial framework aimed at enhancing international cooperation on migration, particularly in addressing migrant security. By covering a wide range of migration governance issues, the GCM lays the groundwork for more humane and dignified treatment of migrants. As a non-binding instrument, the Compact emphasises aspirational objectives rather than rigid dictates, advocating for collaborative responses among states to migration's multifaceted challenges (GCM, 2018). Notably, it draws attention to the critical issue of missing migrants—thousands of whom tragically disappear while fleeing violence or persecution, often amid serious human rights violations. In recognizing this transnational crisis, the Compact calls on states to share responsibility and develop comprehensive policies that safeguard the rights of both migrants and their families (Costello & Foster, 2015). Thus, the GCM signifies a pivotal step toward reconfiguring global migration narratives through a security and human rights lens.

A central principle of the GCM is its focus on promoting migrants' human security. This involves addressing threats to migrants' survival, development, and dignity through measures such as strengthening social protection systems, improving access to justice, and fostering social inclusion.¹⁸ The Compact's emphasis on data-driven policymaking and regional cooperation is particularly relevant in the context of South Asia, where migration dynamics are shaped by cross-border flows, economic disparities, and shared historical legacies.

The 23 objectives of the Compact, mentioned below, are geared towards achieving safe, orderly, and regular migration by addressing several key issues. These include reducing the drivers of irregular migration, ensuring access to essential services, promoting fair labour conditions, combating human trafficking, and facilitating regular migration pathways. In addition, the GCM highlights the necessity of gender-responsive and child-sensitive approaches, thereby recognizing the unique challenges faced by women, children, and marginalised groups in the migration process.¹⁹

Key Features of the GCM

The GCM has 23 key objectives:

1. Collect and utilise accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies
2. Minimise the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin
3. Provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration
4. Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation
5. Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration
6. Facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work
7. Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration
8. Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants
9. Strengthen the transnational response to smuggling of migrants
10. Prevent, combat and eradicate trafficking in persons in the context of international migration
11. Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner

12. Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral
13. Use migration detention only as a measure of last resort and work towards alternatives
14. Enhance consular protection, assistance and cooperation throughout the migration cycle
15. Provide access to basic services for migrants
16. Empower migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion
17. Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration
18. Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences
19. Create conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries
20. Promote faster, safer and cheaper transfer of remittances and foster financial inclusion of migrants
21. Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration
22. Establish mechanisms for the portability of social security entitlements and earned benefits
23. Strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration (GCM, 2018)

To elucidate further, emphasising the need for states to ensure the protection of migrants' human rights, regardless of their statuses, the GCM argues in favour of basic healthcare, education as well as protection from arbitrary detention and deportation.²⁰ In a time of collapsing of nationality and subverting of borders, when mobility gets increasingly identified as a risk or threat to national sovereignty, the GCM talks about migrants as subjects of development and integrating them with the world development paradigm. By enshrining security and protection as core principles, the Global Compacts aim to create a framework that balances the needs of states with the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, ultimately promoting a more humane and effective approach to migration management. However, there are a number of challenges.

The GCM delineates several key principles and objectives aimed at enhancing migrant security within a framework that respects state sovereignty. Central to the Compact is the commitment to establish pathways for regular migration, as highlighted in the objective of "availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration" (Objective 5).²¹ This objective underlines the importance of providing safe alternatives to irregular migration, which often places individuals at risk. Furthermore, the Compact addresses the necessity of protecting the rights of all migrants and ensuring that their needs are met regardless of their legal status, including provisions that emphasise non-discrimination (Fajardo del Castillo et al.). Emphasising the need for states to ensure the protection of migrants' human rights, regardless of their statuses, the GCM argues in favour of basic healthcare, education as well as protection from arbitrary detention and deportation.²² In a time of collapsing of nationality and subverting of borders, when mobility gets increasingly identified as a risk or threat to national sovereignty, the GCM talks about migrants as subjects of development and integrating them with the world development paradigm.

By prioritising the safety, dignity, and well-being of migrants and refugees, the Global compact tries to promote a more inclusive and sustainable approach to security, one that recognises the interconnectedness of human security and state security. They also recognise the importance of

addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and victims of trafficking.²³ By enshrining security and protection as core principles, the Global Compacts aim to create a framework that balances the needs of states with the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, ultimately promoting a more humane and effective approach to migration management. It is pertinent to mention here why the term Global “Compacts” has been used in plural. This is explained in the following section.

Conflating Categories: Reading GCR alongside GCM

The Global Compact for Migration was followed by one for Refugees, entitled as the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) in December 2018. While the scope of this paper is not to talk about the GCR, but with often conflated categories between migrants and refugees in the sub-continent, it is important to also mention the GCR here. There is a specific context giving rise to the Compacts although the discussions for having these documents date back to years. On the one hand, Syrians escaping in boats with toddler Aylan Kurdi’s picture (Samaddar and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2018) on Turkish sea shore marking the pinnacle of the European migration crisis while on the other hand, distressed boats full of migrants capsizing in the Bay of Bengal or landing up on the shores of South and Southeast Asian countries emerged. The Asian image depicted the insecurity that marks lives of people migrating for various reasons from seeking asylum to seeking employment in the subcontinent. This mixed group of people clubbed together as undocumented migrants of mostly from Bangladesh ending up in border detention camps, or as bonded labour or/and perishing in the sea (Samaddar and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2018). This led to renewed discussions among global policy makers and concerned states surrounding migrants’ rights, protection, and safety. These discussions paved the way for the New York Declaration of Human Rights (NDHR) in 2016 which culminated into the Global Compacts in 2018. This was in continuation to UN’s previous dialogues on the same in 2006, 2007 and 2013.²⁴ Large movements of refugees and migrants have political, economic, social, and humanitarian ramifications across borders. The NDHR recognised that these are “global phenomena that call for global approaches and global solutions”.²⁵ Thus, the global compacts were conceived and adopted, both for “Safe, Orderly and Regular” migration in July 2018 followed by one for Refugees (GCR) in December 2018. Both these global compacts, as notes the official document of UNHCR, are complimentary international cooperation frameworks that fulfil the mandates laid out in the New York Declaration and recognise migrants and refugees might face many common challenges and similar vulnerabilities. It was also flagged that only refugees are entitled to specific international protection and thus the two global compacts were kept separate. The idea still behind having two global compacts together, on migrants and the other on refugees was that even though migrants and refugees are governed by separate protection frameworks, both are drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Collectively, these objectives seek to create a supportive environment that not only prioritises migrant security but also fosters international cooperation, thus promoting comprehensive management of migratory flows that safeguards human dignity and facilitates mobility. However, the distinction between migrants and refugees are both challenged and reaffirmed through the compacts highlighting one of the several paradoxes of the compacts. While the two categories are discussed in similar and parallel ways, they eventually are represented in several texts, which limits the flexibility of categories.

The GCR aims to strengthen refugee protection, provide adequate support, and facilitate durable solutions, such as voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement.²⁶ By prioritising the safety, dignity, and well-being of migrants and refugees, the compacts do certainly try to promote a more inclusive and sustainable approach to security, one that recognises the interconnectedness of human security and state security. They also recognise the importance of addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and victims of trafficking.²⁷

The point being made here is that even though the global compacts were the results of years of discussion, highlighting mixed and massive flows from South Asia, with the very need to address these movements with care and protection for the people on move, notwithstanding the cause motivating such moves, the compacts get stuck in differentiating the people on basis of their identity and reasons for movement. The moment that is done, mapping exercises take place that further result in creating insecurity of people. Digitisation in refugee camps and digital identity documents are often intended to provide security to refugees but there are ample instances across the world to show that they create more angst and suspicion among refugee communities that safeguarding them. However, the significance nonetheless of having these compacts as footholds to claim for rights can't be less underscored.

The GCM's emphasis on protecting the human rights of migrants is particularly relevant for refugees in India, who remain excluded from formal protection frameworks. India's treatment of Rohingya refugees highlights the contradictions inherent in its approach to migration governance. While the GCM calls for inclusive policies to reduce vulnerabilities (GCM 2018: Objective 7), India's reliance on the Foreigners Act of 1946 criminalises undocumented migrants, often framing them as security threats.²⁸ Addressing this gap requires the establishment of a national refugee policy that aligns with international norms. Collaborating with organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can facilitate the integration of refugees into existing welfare schemes, ensuring their access to education, healthcare, and legal protections. However, as Paula Banerjee (2020) notes, such measures must be accompanied by efforts to challenge the securitisation of migration, which undermines the principles of safe and orderly migration.

The GCM distinguishes between "regular" and "irregular" migration, from which the difference in rights for the two categories of migrants is drawn. There is also no rejection of the socially created category of undocumented, "irregular," "illegal" migrants. As for undocumented migration, the GCM states that Member States shall promote legal channels for migration and, to this end, it encourages the identification of specific political goals and good practices. At the same time, the GCM establishes, as a priority, the prevention of "irregular" migration. In this way, many States will have the possibility to reinforce their borders, to encourage "border cooperation," to enter into agreements on the externalisation of borders, closing borders, and repatriations. In the balance between "States' prerogatives and economic interests" and "human rights," the former generally prevails on the latter. Even States' commitment remains somewhat vague and also refugees who live in camps are often left with no documentation that qualify them to go through legal channels- even if there is a provision of providing documents- for instance, refugee cards, even then legal channels within the domestic territory of a state is often out of reach of refugees.²⁹ Therefore, how can this gap be addressed? That is also something the compacts do not throw light on.

GCM states migration is natural. If we consider this in its practicality, the picture that generally emerges is that only the host countries might think in those terms of considering migration positively but the recipient country in very generalist terms focuses upon immigration that often gets

equated as a threat to national security. Therefore, there could arise a conflict of interest among the concerned states as we have witnessed currently in South Asia as well.

Therefore, there are quite a few dichotomies. A global migration policy also needs to also consider global capital, and deeper reasons for why people migrate. It also needs to recognise conditions of de-nationalisation and the difficult question of citizenship as it unfolds in contemporary times not only in South Asia but world over. Questions arise, for instance, the over emphasis on documentation that led to more insecurities than providing security to migrants.

Seven years since its inception, it thus becomes necessary to assess the merits of the compacts, while the positive aspect is to empower migrants and refugees, there are multiple problems like the muting of politics in the compacts. The compacts are also silent so far as politics surrounding migration among states is concerned.

The Role of GCM in India

The outbreak of the Pandemic has exposed several fault lines surrounding migrant labour in India and South Asia and vindicated the need for and importance of protection and support of migrant workers and their families. In South Asia, because migration is deeply entrenched in historical, political, and economic processes, India is a pivotal case for examining the operationalisation of human security. As a country of origin, transit, and destination, India hosts diverse migrant populations, including internal labour migrants, cross-border migrants, and refugees. According to the 2011 Census, India had over 139 million internal migrants, with a significant portion engaged in informal labour. This number has undoubtedly grown, as evidenced by the unprecedented internal displacement witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Samaddar, 2020). Internationally, India hosts refugees such as the Rohingya from Myanmar, as well as economic migrants from neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. However, the absence of a formal refugee policy and the reliance on ad-hoc governance mechanisms have left these populations vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and marginalisation (Chowdhory, 2018). In recent years, the complex landscape of global migration has necessitated renewed attention to the security of migrants, particularly in light of increasing displacement due to conflicts, climate change, and socio-economic disparities.

According to the Migration in India Report 2020-21, the all-India migration rate was 28.9% for July 2020-June 2021, with a 26.5% migration rate in rural areas and 34.9% in urban areas. Female migration recorded a higher share of migration rate of 47.9%, 48% in rural and 47.8% in urban areas. Although there are a few national initiatives for migrants like the Niti Aayog scheme (2021) and recommendations as enshrined in the draft National Migrant Labour Policy or the introduction of One Ration Card project, and so on still overall the story of migrants in India however portrays a tale of distress which was exposed like none other during the pandemic.³⁰

The schemes mentioned are devised to facilitate the lives of migrant labourers for better, but much remains within the ambit of discussions while implementation is still scratchy on ground. According to a few reports published in the media, in recent times NITI Aayog along with a group of officials and civil society members have prepared a draft National Migrant Labour Policy.³¹ According to this Draft National Migrant Labour Policy, some of the issues or challenges concerning migrants are a) The Inter State Migrant Workers Act, 1979 - this covers only labourers migrating through a contractor, leaving out independent migrants, b) the absence of Community Building

Organisations and administrative staff in source states - this has hindered development programmes, pushing tribal and indigenous communities to migrate out, and c) lack of engagement by State governments- state labour departments have little engagement with migrant core issues or challenges as enlisted above and are primarily concerned only about human trafficking. So, their policies too remain within the ambit of how to stop trafficking of migrant labourers, d) Since local governments due to lack of hands and resources have constraints in monitoring the situation of migrants closely hence it paves way for middlemen entrapping migrants in a lot of illicit activities.³²

The report therefore calls for inclusion, that is migration should be considered as an integral part of development and government policies should not hinder rather facilitate internal migration. There should also be avenues for cash transfers, special quotas and reservations for migrants and enhance their agency or capabilities to thrive, which is in sync with the GCM- so we do see steps being thought of towards initiating the GCM in India but one still wonders on the implementation. The draft report also recommends a central/national database (which is still now absent) to “fill the gap between demand and supply” and ensure “maximum benefits of social welfare schemes”.³³ It also calls for ministries and census reports to be consistent with definitions of migrants and try to capture all forms of migrations including seasonal and circular flows and incorporate migrant-specific variables. As for the way forward for migrants in India, the report among many others suggests, a rights-based approach based on welfare and social security schemes can work only if the migrant workers have their own agency, networks, and mobilisation. Two years of pandemic have ushered in significant changes in how refugees build their networks across continents. In fact, the digital boom or revolution in cyberspace have helped refugees build their networks to strengthen their collective identity. Scholars like Sandro Mezzadra has pointed out, use of artificial intelligence, digitisation of borders, boom of ‘digital labour’ most of whom are migrant labour in professions like food delivery apps that have increased from the time of the pandemic have been useful tools for migrants to consolidate and organise themselves.³⁴ There are digitisation efforts as well leading to emergence of a new category of workers like gig workers and platform workers.³⁵

The GCM provides an international framework for addressing challenges related to migration. Rooted in principles of shared responsibility, human rights, and development, the GCM aims to balance state sovereignty with the protection of migrants’ rights. For India, the GCM offers an opportunity to align its migration policies with global best practices, particularly in enhancing the human security of migrants. However, the operationalisation of such a framework requires a critical understanding of migration as a socio-political process that is deeply shaped by regional contexts.

This paper builds on these insights to explore how human security functions in India for both labour migrants and refugees, addressing their vulnerabilities through a nuanced, intersectional lens. The GCM stands as a pivotal framework that aims to address these pressing concerns by promoting international cooperation and best practices in migration management. It emphasises the need for protective measures that ensure both the rights and safety of migrants and their enhanced socio-economic contributions to host countries. Assessing the efficacy of this compact underscores the importance of analysing its implications for both migrant security and the broader socio-political context in which these movements occur. This exploration will reveal the challenges and opportunities presented by the compact, ultimately contributing to an informed dialogue on enhancing migrant security on a global scale.

Drawing on the works of scholars such as Ranabir Samaddar (2020), critical migration studies challenge traditional approaches to migration that often focus solely on economic or policy-driven analyses. Instead, this perspective emphasises the lived experiences of migrants, the power

dynamics shaping their mobility, and the socio-political structures governing migration. This framework views migration as a process embedded in historical, postcolonial, and regional contexts. For instance, South Asia's migration patterns cannot be fully understood without considering the legacy of colonial borders, partition, and postcolonial state-building. Critical migration studies also highlight the ways in which migrants are often excluded from formal frameworks of citizenship and rights, making human security an essential lens for their analysis.

The entire continent of South Asia due to its porosity in borders is also witness to a strong intra-regional mobility that is movement across borders within the continent. Such migration is shaped by regional economic disparities, porous borders, and historical ties. India often serves as a transit country for migrants heading to the Gulf or Southeast Asia from Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Migrants often work in informal sectors, where they are vulnerable to exploitation and lack access to basic services. India also experiences diverse migration flows that reflect the complexities of regional inequalities, labour market demands, environmental crises, and political instabilities. These migration dynamics must be understood within the broader historical and structural context of South Asia, where colonial legacies and contemporary state practices intersect to shape mobility patterns. The GCM's emphasis on fostering international cooperation and ensuring the rights of migrants is particularly relevant in this context. However, migration governance in the region often fails to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by migrants, requiring a critical rethinking of existing frameworks.

Internal Migration: Labour and Urbanisation

According to the 2011 Census, approximately 139 million people in India were classified as internal migrants, with the majority moving within states.³⁶ This movement is largely driven by economic necessity, as rural populations seek employment in urban centers. However, this migration is often characterised by informality and precarity. Migrants are disproportionately employed in low-wage, unregulated sectors such as construction, domestic work, and manufacturing (Samaddar, 2020). These workers face systemic challenges, including lack of access to housing, health care, education, and social protection.

The vulnerabilities of internal labour migrants were starkly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. When nationwide lockdowns were imposed in March 2020, millions of migrant workers were left stranded in cities without work or adequate resources. This led to what has been termed *The Long March*, where thousands undertook perilous journeys on foot to return to their rural homes.³⁷ As Samaddar (2020, 2021) argues, this crisis not only highlighted the state's failure to address the needs of its most vulnerable populations but also underscored the structural neglect that defines migration governance in India. Despite the GCM's emphasis on ensuring the safety and dignity of migrants, India's policies during the pandemic largely prioritised state security and economic recovery over individual well-being or human security.³⁸

Cross-Border Migration: Refugees and Economic Migrants

India has had a tradition of housing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar (including the Rohingya), Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, among others, often the categories get enmeshed and flows become mixed, the lines between them barely exist.³⁹ However, India lacks a

comprehensive refugee policy, instead relying on ad hoc measures and the Foreigners Act of 1946, which often criminalises undocumented migrants.

For instance, the Rohingya, fleeing persecution and ethnic violence in Myanmar, represents one of the most vulnerable refugee groups in India. They face severe human security challenges, including limited access to education, health care, and legal protections. Many live in overcrowded camps with inadequate infrastructure, constantly threatened by deportation or detention. While the GCM emphasises the need for international cooperation to address refugee flows, India's selective engagement with the Compact's principles has limited its effectiveness in providing comprehensive protection for these populations. Economic migrants from neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Nepal, also play a significant role in India's labour market. Migrants from Bangladesh, for instance, are often employed in informal sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, and small-scale industries. Despite their contributions to the economy, these migrants are frequently subjected to discrimination and xenophobic rhetoric, which frames them as "illegal immigrants" and a threat to national security (Samaddar 2021). This securitisation of migration not only exacerbates their vulnerabilities, but also undermines the GCM's commitment to ensuring safe, orderly, and regular migration.⁴⁰

India is also increasingly experiencing migration driven by environmental factors, such as floods, droughts, and rising sea levels. States like Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal are particularly prone to climate-induced displacement, as communities are forced to leave their homes in search of safer environments and livelihoods. The Sundarbans region, for example, has witnessed significant out-migration due to rising sea levels and frequent cyclones.⁴¹ Climate migrants, who often lack formal recognition, are among the most marginalised groups in India's migration governance framework. The GCM offers a framework for addressing such challenges through its focus on climate-related migration and disaster risk reduction.

Female migrants, again for instance, face unique vulnerabilities, including higher risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence. Domestic workers, who are predominantly women, often lack legal protections and are subjected to exploitative working conditions (Chowdhory 2020, 95-120; Chowdhory and Banerjee, 2022). Similarly, Dalit and Adivasi migrants face caste-based discrimination that limits their access to resources and opportunities, further exacerbating their marginalisation. By incorporating the principles of human security, policymakers can ensure that migration policies are inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of migrant populations. The GCM's emphasis on gender-responsive and human rights-based approaches provides a valuable framework for advancing this agenda.⁴²

India's Position in GCM Negotiations

India played an active role in the negotiations leading to the adoption of the GCM, advocating for the recognition of migration as a developmental issue rather than a security threat. Indian diplomats emphasised the importance of respecting national sovereignty and highlighted the need to address the root causes of migration, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change.⁴³ However, India's engagement with the Compact has been selective, reflecting the tension between its international commitments and domestic priorities. On one hand, India has aligned certain aspects of its migration policies with the GCM's principles, such as promoting safe migration pathways through bilateral agreements with Gulf countries and enhancing the welfare of overseas Indian workers. On the other

hand, its approach to refugees and undocumented migrants has been marked by exclusionary practices, as seen in the treatment of the Rohingya and the securitisation of cross-border migration from Bangladesh. This duality underscores the need for a more holistic approach to implementing the GCM in India.

The framework of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration also articulates a comprehensive approach to managing migration that emphasises cooperation among countries. This initiative had initially emerged from the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, where member states recognised the urgent need to protect displaced persons and enhance international collaboration in migration governance (McAdam J, p. 160-194). Central to this framework is the integration of gender perspectives, reflecting an awareness of the distinct challenges faced by different groups within migratory flows. A thorough gender analysis is also crucial, as it determines how the framework can address existing inequalities and promote equitable migration policies. However, as noted in recent critiques, the implementation of gender principles remains inconsistent, raising concerns about the Compact's potential to affect meaningful change for various demographics involved in migration. Ultimately, the Global Compact represents both an opportunity and a challenge for advancing migrants' security in an increasingly complex global landscape.

Challenges in Implementing the GCM in India

The operationalisation of human security for migrants in India must navigate the tension between state-centric governance frameworks and the GCM's commitment to safe migration (UN 2018, para. 15).⁴⁴ While the GCM envisions migration as a driver of sustainable development (Objective 1), India's policies prioritise sovereignty and border control. This clash exacerbates vulnerabilities for labour migrants (Rajan & Oommen, 2021), refugees (Chimni, 2021), and climate-displaced populations (CPR, 2022).

One major issue is the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for migration governance. India has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, relying instead on the Foreigners Act of 1946, which treats refugees and undocumented migrants as illegal immigrants. This has led to ad hoc and inconsistent responses to migration, undermining the principles of human security and international cooperation outlined in the GCM (Banerjee 2020). Another challenge lies in the fragmented nature of India's migration policies, which often fail to address the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by migrants. For example, while the GCM calls for gender-responsive approaches, India's labour policies frequently overlook the specific needs of female migrants, such as access to maternity benefits and protections against gender-based violence. Similarly, the absence of robust data on migration flows and migrant demographics limits the government's ability to develop evidence-based policies, as emphasised in Objective 1 of the GCM. Finally, regional geopolitics and domestic political considerations also complicate India's engagement with the GCM. The securitisation of migration, particularly in the context of cross-border flows from Bangladesh and Myanmar, has fuelled exclusionary narratives that frame migrants as threats to national security. This not only undermines the human rights of migrants but also contradicts the GCM's emphasis on fostering social cohesion and combating xenophobia (Samaddar, 2021).

Human Security under the GCM

The operationalisation of human security for migrants in India thus must navigate the tension between state-centric governance frameworks and the GCM's commitment to safe and orderly migration. While the GCM envisions migration as a driver of sustainable development, its practical implementation often clashes with national policies that prioritise sovereignty and border control over human security. In India, this challenge is compounded by the diverse vulnerabilities faced by labour migrants, refugees, and climate-induced migrants. To align with the GCM's principles, India must adopt a nuanced approach that critically evaluates the concept of "safe and orderly migration" within the context of regional dynamics and socio-political realities. The GCM's focus on human security aligns closely with its objectives of protecting migrants' rights and addressing their vulnerabilities. Key objectives, such as Objective 7 (addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration) and Objective 15 (providing access to basic services), directly reflect the principles of human security. In India, these objectives can be operationalised through policies that prioritise the well-being of labour migrants and refugees.

For instance, Objective 6 of the GCM, which promotes fair and ethical recruitment, is highly relevant for India's internal and cross-border labour migrants. Migrants in informal sectors often face exploitative recruitment practices, wage theft, and poor working conditions, highlighting the need for stronger regulatory mechanisms. Similarly, Objective 5, which encourages the expansion of regular migration pathways, can address the challenges faced by undocumented migrants, particularly those from neighbouring countries. The GCM's objectives emphasise the importance of protecting migrants' rights, addressing vulnerabilities, and fostering international cooperation. For India, these objectives offer a framework for addressing systemic gaps in migration governance. However, achieving "safe and orderly migration" requires addressing the structural inequities that underlie migration patterns, particularly in a context where informality and precarity dominate.

Labour Rights and Precarity

Internal labour migration in India exemplifies the challenges of operationalising safe and orderly migration. The informal nature of labour markets leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitative practices, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions. While the GCM's Objective 6 promotes fair and ethical recruitment, its implementation in India has been limited by the absence of regulatory mechanisms that address the informal sector's complexities (Deshingkar and Akter 2009). Initiatives like the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme represent progress toward reducing food insecurity for migrants, aligning with Objective 15 of the GCM, which focuses on ensuring access to basic services. However, as Ranabir Samaddar (2020) argues, these measures often fail to address the structural exclusions faced by migrants, such as limited access to housing, healthcare, and social protection. A more comprehensive approach, integrating labour market reforms and social security coverage, is essential for advancing the principles of human security.

In Nepal, remittances contribute nearly 25% of GDP, yet protections for labour migrants remain weak, with high recruitment fees and exploitative practices persisting despite the GCM's Objective 6. Similarly, Bangladesh has made limited progress in addressing unsafe migration through trafficking networks, which remains a significant issue for its large labour force migrating to the Gulf.

Emphasis on "Order" Over Agency

Critical migration scholars such as Ranabir Samaddar argues that the GCM's emphasis on "orderly migration" prioritises state control over migrant agency, perpetuating exclusionary practices under the guise of governance. In India, this tension is evident in restrictive visa policies and the treatment of undocumented migrants. The GCM's global framework does not adequately account for regional specificities in South Asia, where migration is shaped by historical, cultural, and environmental factors. For instance: Unlike regions like the European Union, South Asia lacks a cohesive regional framework for migration governance. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been largely inactive in addressing migration, limiting the GCM's potential to foster coordinated responses to issues such as labour migration and refugee flows. This absence of regional collaboration exacerbates the fragmented implementation of GCM objectives across South Asia.

Climate Migration and Regional Cooperation

Climate-induced migration poses significant challenges to the GCM's vision of safe migration. In states like West Bengal and Odisha, environmental factors such as rising sea levels and cyclones are driving displacement, creating a category of "invisible migrants" who are excluded from formal recognition and support. India's climate-induced migration reflects Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of the "risk society," where global environmental crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In regions like the Sundarbans, rising sea levels and frequent cyclones have displaced thousands of families, forcing them into precarious migration pathways. For example, a 2021 report by the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) estimated that over 70,000 people were displaced annually due to environmental factors in the Sundarbans region. Many of these climate migrants move to urban slums in Kolkata, where they face unemployment, inadequate housing, and poor sanitation. While the GCM's Objective 2 emphasises minimising the drivers of forced migration, India's climate policies remain reactive, focusing on short-term disaster relief rather than long-term adaptation. The absence of frameworks recognising climate migrants further undermines their human security, leaving them invisible in policy discourses.

The GCM's Objective 2, which focuses on minimising the drivers of forced migration, underscores the need for climate adaptation policies that address these challenges. Regional cooperation through platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can play a critical role in addressing climate migration. By developing coordinated responses to cross-border displacement, India can contribute to the GCM's goal of fostering international cooperation while ensuring that climate migrants' security is protected.

South Asia's migration patterns are deeply shaped by colonial legacies and post-partition state-building. Ranabir Samaddar (2020) emphasises that India's approach to cross-border migration is rooted in historical anxieties about borders, identity, and sovereignty. For example, the partition of Bengal in 1947 led to continuous migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into India, driven by ethnic, linguistic, and religious tensions. These flows have often been securitised, with migrants framed as threats to national identity. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam is a stark example of how historical migration patterns are politicised. The exclusion of nearly 1.9 million people, many of whom are Bengali-speaking Muslims, highlights the contradictions between India's policies and the GCM's principles of non-discrimination and legal identity (Objective 4). This

exclusion is compounded by the lack of legal pathways for cross-border migrants, which perpetuates irregular migration and fuels xenophobia.

Reconceptualising the Concept of “Safe and Orderly Migration” in the GCM

The concept of “safe and orderly migration,” as articulated in the GCM, has been critiqued for its potential to reinforce exclusionary practices under the guise of governance. The emphasis on “order” often prioritises state control over migrants’ agency, leading to policies that securitise migration rather than addressing its root causes (Betts 2011). In the Indian context, this tension is evident in the treatment of cross-border migrants, who are frequently subjected to detention and deportation despite the GCM’s emphasis on rights-based approaches. To operationalise human security, India must adopt a critical perspective on safe and orderly migration, recognising it as a process that must be inclusive, participatory, and context-specific. This involves shifting the focus from control and exclusion to empowerment and protection, ensuring that migrants are not merely passive recipients of aid but active agents in shaping their futures.

Scholars like Alexander Betts (2011) argue that South-South migration governance is often fragmented, as states prioritise bilateral agreements over multilateral frameworks. For example, India has bilateral labour agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which facilitated the migration of over 7 million Indian workers. However, cross-border flows within South Asia lack similar mechanisms. The failure to address these flows collectively undermines the GCM’s Objective 23, which emphasises strengthening international cooperation. A notable exception is the 2015 India-Nepal agreement, which allows for free movement of people. Expanding such agreements could provide a model for regional collaboration.

Operationalising Human Security in Practice

The GCM’s emphasis on human security often clashes with state-centric approaches to national security. Critical security studies highlight this tension, arguing that traditional security frameworks prioritise sovereignty and border control over individual well-being (Bigo 2002). In India, this is evident in policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which selectively grants citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries. While the GCM calls for combating xenophobia (Objective 17), such policies institutionalise exclusion and perpetuate insecurity for marginalised groups.

The mass displacement of labour migrants during the COVID-19 lockdowns epitomised the failures of existing governance frameworks to ensure safe and orderly migration. While civil society organisations played a vital role in providing food and transportation assistance, the absence of institutional support left millions stranded in precarious conditions (Samaddar 2020). This crisis underscores the need for systemic reforms that integrate human security principles into disaster response and labour policies. Rohingya refugees, many of whom reside in camps in Delhi and Jammu, face severe human security challenges, including inadequate access to basic services and constant threats of deportation. While community-led initiatives and UNHCR interventions have provided some relief, the lack of a national refugee policy continues to undermine their security (Chowdhory 2018). Aligning with the GCM’s objectives requires not only legal reforms but also public awareness campaigns to counteract xenophobia and foster social inclusion.

The securitisation of migration, as theorised by Ole Wæver (1995), frames migrants as threats, enabling states to justify extraordinary measures like detention, deportation, and border fortification. India's treatment of Rohingya refugees also exemplifies these dynamics. Despite the GCM's emphasis on reducing vulnerabilities, Rohingya settlements in Jammu have been demolished, and refugees face deportation to Myanmar, where they risk persecution. India's lack of a national refugee policy creates significant challenges for operationalising the GCM's principles of human security. Besides the Rohingya, Tibetans, and Sri Lankan Tamils are often categorised as illegal immigrants under the Foreigners Act of 1946. This securitised approach not only criminalises refugees but also denies them access to basic rights and services (Chowdhury 2018). While the GCM emphasises cooperation in managing refugee flows, India's ad hoc policies have led to inconsistent responses that often prioritise national security over human security.

Structural Challenges in India's Migration Governance Framework

Internal labour migration in India exemplifies Johan Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, where systemic inequalities perpetuate harm by denying individuals access to resources and opportunities. Migrants from poorer regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand move to cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore in search of work. However, they are often faced with systemic exclusion from social protection systems, poor working conditions, and precarious housing. For instance, a study by Deshingkar and Akter (2009) revealed that over 50% of labour migrants in India lack access to housing or public health facilities, and 90% are employed without contracts in unregulated sectors.⁴⁵ The COVID-19 lockdown further exacerbated this structural violence, as millions were left stranded. Although schemes like One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) aimed to address food insecurity, they failed to provide comprehensive support. Galtung's framework allows us to view these failures not as isolated instances but as part of broader systemic inequalities embedded in India's governance structures.

While India's international labour migration policies demonstrate alignment with the GCM, its domestic migration governance remains inconsistent with the Compact's principles. Over 90% of India's labour force is employed in the informal sector, where migrant workers are disproportionately represented (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). This informality undermines the GCM's Objective 6, which promotes fair and ethical recruitment, as well as Objective 22, which emphasises social protection for migrants. Informal workers often lack access to grievance mechanisms, healthcare, and housing, making them particularly vulnerable during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the lockdowns in 2020 exposed the systemic neglect of internal migrants, many of whom were stranded without food, shelter, or transportation. Although the government introduced relief measures such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, these were often inaccessible to migrants due to the absence of proper documentation and portability of welfare benefits (Samaddar, 2020). This reflects a broader disconnect between national policies and the GCM's emphasis on ensuring safety and dignity for migrants. The following gaps further highlight critical areas of concern:

Lack of a National Refugee Framework: As mentioned previously, India hosts diverse refugee populations, including Rohingya, Tibetans, and Sri Lankan Tamils. However, the absence of a national refugee law means these groups are often victims of the Foreigners Act of 1946, which criminalises undocumented migrants without distinguishing between refugees and irregular migrants.

The UNHCR (2022) estimates that over 40,000 Rohingya refugees reside in India, with the majority living in overcrowded settlements without access to formal housing, healthcare, or education. India's deportation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar in 2021 has been widely criticised as a violation of the GCM's Objective 7, which emphasises reducing vulnerabilities and protecting migrants' human rights. India's internal migration comprises over 450 million people (Economic Survey 2017), yet internal migrants face significant challenges, including limited access to social protection and welfare schemes. The One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, launched to ensure food security for migrant workers, has faced implementation challenges, with reports indicating that only 60% of eligible migrants were able to access ration benefits in 2021 (NITI Aayog 2022). During the COVID-19 lockdown, over 10 million migrant workers were forced to return to their villages, often on foot, due to inadequate institutional support. This mass exodus highlighted the structural neglect of internal migrants, undermining GCM Objective 15 (access to services).

As also mentioned earlier in the paper, Cross-border migration from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar is often framed as a security threat rather than a humanitarian or developmental issue. The implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam excluded nearly 1.9 million people, many of whom are suspected to be undocumented migrants from Bangladesh. This exclusionary policy contradicts the GCM's Objective 4, which emphasises ensuring legal identity for migrants. Similarly, the treatment of Rohingya refugees as "illegal infiltrators" reflects the securitisation of migration, which perpetuates discrimination and undermines the principles of safe and orderly migration.

Climate Migration and the Vulnerability Nexus: India's climate-induced migration reflects Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of the "risk society," where global environmental crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In regions like the Sundarbans, rising sea levels and frequent cyclones have displaced thousands of families, forcing them into precarious migration pathways. For example: A 2021 report by the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) estimated that over 70,000 people were displaced annually due to environmental factors in the Sundarbans region. Many of these climate migrants move to urban slums in Kolkata, where they face unemployment, inadequate housing, and poor sanitation. While the GCM's Objective 2 emphasises minimising the drivers of forced migration, India's climate policies remain reactive, focusing on short-term disaster relief rather than long-term adaptation. The absence of frameworks recognising climate migrants further undermines their human security, leaving them invisible in policy discourses. Kerala's migrant welfare programs, co-designed with civil society, exemplify decentralised governance (Rajan 2018, 14). BIMSTEC's potential for climate protocols aligns with GCM Objective 2 (Bhattacharya 2023, 10).

While the GCM provides a valuable starting point for migration governance, it is also not without its limitations.

1. **Non-Binding Nature:** The GCM's non-binding nature limits its enforceability, allowing states to selectively adopt its principles. This has been a significant critique of the Compact, as it often relies on voluntary commitments rather than mandatory obligations (Betts, 2011). In India's case, this has resulted in selective engagement with the GCM, where objectives such as promoting labour migration to Gulf countries are prioritised, while issues like refugee protection and internal migration remain neglected.
2. **Focus on State Sovereignty:** The GCM's emphasis on respecting state sovereignty often conflicts with its human rights-based objectives. Scholars like Ranabir Samaddar (2021) have argued that this duality enables states to use the Compact as a tool for reinforcing border

control and exclusionary practices, rather than advancing migrants' human security. In India, this tension is evident in policies like the NRC and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which have been critiqued for their discriminatory impact on Muslim migrants and refugees.

3. **Overgeneralisation of Migration Dynamics:** The GCM has been critiqued for its tendency to generalise migration dynamics, failing to account for regional specificities. For instance, migration in South Asia is shaped by factors such as caste, gender, and postcolonial legacies, which require localised approaches to governance. As Banerjee (2020) notes, the Compact's global framework must be adapted to regional contexts to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by migrants in the Global South.

Successes of the GCM: Opportunities in the South Asian and Indian Context

Despite its limitations, the GCM has catalysed important conversations and incremental progress in migration governance in South Asia. Labour migration from South Asia to the Gulf countries is one of the largest migration corridors globally, and the GCM has reinforced efforts to improve conditions for migrant workers. India's bilateral labour agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, have significantly contributed to safer migration pathways and improved protections for Indian workers abroad. These efforts align with the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), particularly Objectives 6 (ethical recruitment) and 19 (migrant contributions).

India has signed labour agreements with countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, focusing on ethical recruitment, skill development, and worker welfare. These agreements align with GCM Objectives 6 (ethical recruitment) and 19 (migrant contributions). For instance, the e-Migrate system, introduced by the Indian government, aims to reduce exploitation by enabling online verification of recruitment agencies. According to the World Bank (2021), remittances from Indian workers abroad reached \$87 billion in 2021, the highest in the world, with a significant share originating from GCC countries. This underscores the economic importance of labour migration in India's development strategy. The introduction of the e-Migrate system has reduced recruitment fraud by enabling online verification of recruitment agencies. This aligns with GCM commitments to ensure fair and ethical recruitment practices. Reports indicate that between 2018 and 2021, complaints related to fraudulent recruitment fell by 22% (Ministry of External Affairs 2021).

The Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) provides life and health insurance to overseas Indian workers, covering hospitalisation costs and compensation for disability or death. As of 2022, over 1.5 million Indian workers had benefited from the scheme. Additionally, initiatives like the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) have provided emergency assistance to over 12,000 workers stranded abroad due to wage disputes, labour rights violations, or crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (MEA 2022). India has prioritised skill development for overseas workers through the Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PKVY), which provides sector-specific training to improve employability in GCC countries. By 2022, more than 100,000 workers had received training in fields such as construction and healthcare, helping align migration with GCM Objectives 6 and 18 (skills recognition).

These initiatives illustrate India's progress in operationalising the GCM's principles for international labour migration. How much these are accessible to migrant groups remains debatable. Also, the focus on overseas workers has not been matched by comparable efforts for internal

migrants or refugees, highlighting key gaps in domestic policy frameworks. So, while international labour migration policies demonstrate alignment with the GCM, its domestic migration governance remains inconsistent with the Compact's principles. India's internal migration comprises over 450 million people (Economic Survey 2017), yet, internal migrants face significant challenges, including limited access to social protection and welfare schemes. The One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, launched to ensure food security for migrant workers, has faced implementation challenges, with reports indicating that only 60% of eligible migrants were able to access ration benefits in 2021 (NITI Aayog 2022). During the COVID-19 lockdown, over 10 million migrant workers were forced to return to their villages, often on foot, due to inadequate institutional support. This mass exodus highlighted the structural neglect of internal migrants, undermining GCM Objective 15 (access to services). The GCM's emphasis on addressing drivers of migration (GCM 2018: Objective 2) has also spurred discussions on climate-induced displacement in South Asia.

India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) includes initiatives aimed at building climate resilience in vulnerable regions. While not directly linked to the GCM, these efforts reflect an alignment with its objectives. This long-term strategy incorporates migration as a key component of climate adaptation, addressing displacement caused by rising sea levels and flooding. The GCM has also encouraged the development of programmes to support migrant welfare, both abroad and within South Asia. Organisations like Aajeevika Bureau and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have leveraged the GCM's principles to advocate for better protections for internal migrants, including portable social benefits and access to skill training.

Conclusion

For proper implementation of the GCM in South Asia, and following the recommendations of the 2022 review and follow-up steps of the UNGCM, the region needs a regional migration framework first, modelled on the GCM, to address the effective implementation of the GCM in the region to securitise and protect migrants, especially informal flows, and refugees as well. The most pressing areas of review however are cross-border flows and climate-induced displacement. SAARC can serve as a platform for developing collective policies that align with the Compact's objectives. Introducing monitoring mechanisms within the GCM framework can ensure greater accountability in its implementation. For instance, states could submit periodic progress reports on their adherence to GCM objectives, evaluated by international organisations.

The GCM can promote policies that recognise and formalise informal migration pathways in South Asia, ensuring that informal migrants, often victims of fallacious state policies and becoming part of mixed flows, are not excluded from protections. Finally, the GCM offers a transformative framework for addressing migration challenges, but its success depends on localised adaptations and political will. For India and its South Asian neighbours, aligning national and regional agendas with the Compact requires a paradigm shift from securitised approaches to human security-focused governance. By fostering cooperation, addressing systemic vulnerabilities, and promoting inclusive policies, South Asia can advance the principles of safe, orderly, and regular migration, ensuring dignity and security for all migrants.

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