

Migration to the Middle East

Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East.

Edited by Fred Arnold and Nasrat M. Shah. Boulder, CO:
Westview, 1986. 265 pp. \$26.50.

Nazli Choucri

This study of *Asian Labor Migration* is an edited volume seeking to explore the Asian side of a complex migration equation. The effort is commendable, particularly in light of the paucity of comparative studies and the general inconsistency of prevailing information and assessments. The effort is further commendable given its scope of coverage, both geographically and regarding issue-areas. Clearly the Middle East is a dominant market for Asian labor and, equally clearly, Asians are critical to the labor markets of the region. The volume is an outgrowth of a conference held in September, 1983, at which these papers were presented.

The volume is in three parts. The first seeks to provide a regional "perspective"; the second focuses on East and South-east Asia, and the third highlights issues in South Asia. An almost inevitable feature of an edited volume is some unevenness in the quality of individual pieces. This book is no exception; however, its breadth of coverage allows the reader to "cross-check" information and data as individual authors provide their own assessment. This cross-check, however, is more appropriate to the editorial stage than to the review effort. It is the editors' responsibility to provide continuity and point to conflicting evidence or conclusions. This service is not rendered, either to facilitate interpretation or to highlight points of contention.

Dr. Nazli Choucri is a Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She edited *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Population and Conflict*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984).

Chapter 1, an introduction by the editors referring to the "labor pipeline," presents an interesting concept with an obvious analogy. Concern is expressed regarding future prospects in light of new oil market conditions.

An "empirical assessment" is provided by Lionel Demery in Chapter 2, a heroic effort to sort out fact and figures. Stocks and flows are differentiated, serving as an initial cross-check for figures elsewhere in the volume. A country by country assessment is made which is of value. Recognition of flaws in data is perhaps one of this chapter's major contributions.

Chapter 3, by Mostafa H. Nagi, focuses on "determinants of current trends and future outlook." Here, also, an effort is made to provide an empirical base (somewhat redundant, and not always consistent with Demery's estimates). Economic and "non-economic" determinants of Asian migration are explored and there is suggestion of the emergence of stratification by nationality in the labor receiving countries. (On a personal note, I should add that on page 68 the author reproduced a table which I published earlier (in *Middle East Review*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, 1983-84, p. 27), but neglected to cite either the source or the reference. I appreciate the fact that he considers the data, presented as Table 3.1 in this edited volume, "the best available estimate of imports and exports of labor in the early 1980s for the individual Middle Eastern Countries" (p. 47), but would have appreciated it more had the author provided the reference, a common courtesy among academics (especially as the original table took much time and effort). Incidentally, this is the only

table in the volume where a source is *not* provided.

Chapter 4, by the editors, reviews government policies for regulating migration. Six issue areas are covered. These are legislative and administrative arrangements, bilateral agreements, migrant welfare, welfare of families, mechanisms for increasing remittances, and training programs. It is very much in the nature of a catalogue of policy instruments rather than policy orientations or structures of preferences.

Chapter 5, by Charles W. Stahl, is one of the best contributions to this volume. He focuses on labor market effects of migration for the sending countries, and makes an effort to address the issue of the "distribution of the gains."

The individual country chapters are very insightful and by far the most interesting contribution of this volume. Indeed, Chapters 6-13 provide useful information, much of it for the first time, and in large part by individuals who have direct experience with the migration phenomena, and/or administrative responsibilities in their own countries. The chapters on the Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Pakistan, Kerala (India), Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh all give more than just glimpses of the issues at hand. For example, the chapters on the Philippines, by John E. Smart, Virginia A. Teodosio and Carol J. Jimenez, report on a survey study of 800 overseas workers in 1981. Appropriate caution is used in interpreting the results and in recognizing the fact that these illegal workers escape survey. The analysis focuses heavily on learning of new skills, and the conclusion supports an affirmative response with respect to experience and confidence, rather than on learning new modes of production. Disposition of earnings and remittances are also examined. A following chapter, by Stella P. Go and Leticia T. Postrado explores further the social conditions of Filipino contract workers overseas.

The chapter on Thailand, by Peeratthep Roongshivin, seeks to delineate costs and benefits of migration, and identifies two gains (remittances and relief for unemployment) and several costs (including creation of labor shortages). The chapter on South Korea, by Sooyong Kim, highlights the role of the construction industry as a conduit for migration and reveals the role of companies as recruiters, employers, and managers of migration. The chapter on Pakistan, by Nasreen Abbasi and Mohammad Irfan, examines impacts on families "left behind." Again, the assessment is mixed; there are gains and there are losses. Households are burdened by the departure of workers, but they are relieved by the flow of remittances.

The chapter on the case of Kerala, by Leela Gulati, examines the impact on the family of male migration with a focus on implications for the females. The conclusion argued is that severe strains emerge as the result of migration. The Sri Lanka case, by R.B.M. Korale, follows in the same vein, looking at demographic and socioeconomic effects of migration, and providing a profile of the migrants based on data compiled by the Ministry of Plan. Sri Lanka's share of the Middle East market is small; nonetheless it cannot be overlooked, as the author reminds us in the conclusion.

The final chapter is on Bangladesh, by A.M.A.H. Siddigi, who stresses the "mixed blessing" of the migration experience. The chapter catalogues many of the difficulties encountered by migrants (i.e., unrealistic expectations, social tensions, corruption, family problems, etc.). The author concludes that appropriate policy responses might reduce the worst of the ailments. On balance, the case chapters are provocative and interesting, despite an element of repetition in themes and issues, reflecting, of course, the parallel experiences.

Missing from the volume, unfortunately, is coverage of two topics that would have added immeasurably to the utility of this collection. One is an assessment of similarities and differences among the cases examined which could have been used to explain and justify the repetition of themes. A second addition could have been a chapter

on views from the receiving countries asking how the Middle Easterners themselves perceive Asian labor. Indeed, the "pipeline" at hand moves labor to a particular set market. The recipients' views and concerns are important in the overall equation (particularly given the note of complaint in several of the chapters).

Markets, after all, consist of supply and demand sides, and pipelines are only conveyors, transmitting elements from one point to another. In these terms, the obvious analogy loses its significance.

It is not to fault the editors that these two issues are raised here, but rather to point to the dilemmas in the "real world". Asians and Middle Easterners have simply not been talking to one another on these issues. Indeed, attendance at the conference where the papers were presented indicated some of the myopia of prevailing analyses. The papers, too, reflect this perspective. No notice is taken of the fact, for example, that the first conference at the governmental level bringing Asians and Arabs face to face to discuss shared concerns took place in Bangkok in September, 1984. There several of the issues raised by the authors of this edited volume were discussed. This conference, a notable event in its own right, illustrates the stark reality that markets entail a demand and a supply side and, more importantly, when markets are dominated and regulated by governments and political priorities (at either end of the equation, or both) analyses of what is "real" tend to be confounded accordingly. The Tripartite Conference, as it is formally labeled, brought together official representatives of select labor importers and exporters, and official representatives from the International Labour Organization. Precedent had been set for discussions at official levels toward resolving some of the more serious issues under contention. No claim is made here for the effectiveness of the discussion; it is simply noted that the fact of such a meeting occurring at all suggests prospects for moving migration issues beyond the confines of the marketplace to a more appropriate plane of state-to-state interaction and diplomacy.

Of equal importance as a phenomenon in its own right is the broad penetration of Asians in the labor markets of Arab labor exporting countries. For example, Asians have appeared in Tunisia and in Egypt (in construction and in the services), a phenomenon ignored by the authors of the individual chapters. While the numbers are small relative to the Asian presence in the Gulf, it is, again, the *fact* of this penetration that is important for it in contributing to the politicization of migration in the Middle East. Debates on the issue in the People's Assembly in Egypt illustrate what may happen when politics and markets intersect, and where a legitimate forum exists in which people can express their views on issues they feel strongly about. Here, too, is another reason for the importance of views from the Middle East. Focusing, as the editors do, on the oil market as the prime determinant of demand for Asian labor may overstate the case, reducing the equation to necessary, but not sufficient, conditions. In other words, there are factors — political responses, social concerns, cultural responses — that influence the demand side of this labor market over and above its strictly economic features.

Implicit in the recent literature on labor migration, and this volume is no exception, is a view of migration as a commodity, to be imported and exported, at prices which clear the markets. Indeed, the remittance effect of migration reifies this view. However dehumanizing it may be to equate human beings with cotton, oil, wheat, machinery or other tradeables, the fact remains that mobility across borders for employment is generally equivalent to raw materials exported for inputs to production processes in industrial economies. This exchange affects market conditions at both ends of the relationship, much as labor migration influences labor market conditions, not only in the recipient countries, but in the senders as well. International rules and regulations operative in commodity exchange or trade are not generalizable to exchanges of manpower.

At this writing the international community is grappling with the establishment of an international convention governing migrant workers. This move, in itself, illustrates the salience of the phenomenon, and its scale and scope. The challenge now is to devise a viable set of rules, and obtain official support from individual governments. Here,

both senders and receivers (and countries that send as well as receive labor) influence the final outcome. The concerns expressed by the authors of the case chapters in *Asian Labor Migration* will assuredly be reflected in the deliberations leading to an international convention in the years to come. ■