

## Book Review: Ullah, AKM. A., & Chattoraj, D. (2022). COVID-19 Pandemic and the Migrant Population in Southeast Asia: Vaccine, Diplomacy and Disparity

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The book co-authored by AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chattoraj “COVID-19 Pandemic and the Migrant Population in Southeast Asia” is undoubtedly one of the most significant ones in the series of publications witnessed during and after the coronavirus pandemic period. As correctly pointed out by the authors in the preface, this volume is one of the few to address the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Southeast Asia. The authors have anchored the book in empiricism. Consequently, located in the larger political economy of the pandemic, this volume offers crucial insights into how migrant workers negotiated the crises, how the precarity of work and living conditions informed their health and social vulnerability, and how the inoculation scape remained distant, conflicted, and highly skewed for the migrant workers in the Southeast Asian region, specifically Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. This makes it a useful read for policymakers and practitioners aiming to learn from this pandemic and prepare for the next.

The book has six chapters, following an order of events that, in the words of the authors, start with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then move on to address how migrants were implicated in the pandemic in general and as a category offering “labour” in particular. Notwithstanding the level of skill and status of migrants, the authors observe that they always remained at risk – starting with the possibilities of quarantine and isolation, to accessing vaccines. Chapter 1, “The COVID-19 pandemic: shaker and shaper of the world”, encapsulates the overall spirit of the volume so that the readers know what to expect in the next five chapters. It mainly tackles the subject of the coronavirus pandemic at large and its several impacts on a global scale.

In the second chapter, “Contextualizing the pandemic in the migration domain”, the authors offer detailed accounts of how the pandemic impacted

migrant workers in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. It also addresses crucial topics like the poor work conditions of the migrant workers that led to limited possibilities of physical distancing. This chapter also engages with the question of which migrant workers could afford to quarantine and who could not. A related topic in this context is mobility restrictions and the privilege of immobility, which most of the migrant workers trapped in low-wage, blue-collar jobs could not practice. This chapter is significant in discussing some of the themes of what later came to be known in academic parlance as a shadow pandemic – the hazardous work and living situations of the migrant workers in wealthy countries like Singapore that the host countries usually hide from the rest of the world.

This is followed by a description of how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities – the discourse presented in Chapter 3 is titled “COVID-19: An amplifier of existing inequalities”. The authors mention various locales of inequality – social, economic, political, and health-related. This chapter draws our attention to how the pandemic affected both the migrant workers in the host countries and their families in the home countries, as the former could send fewer remittances home than otherwise. Setting the case of Southeast Asia on a global platform, the authors argue that the coronavirus pandemic left socially disadvantaged categories, including “disabled women, pregnant women, indigenous communities, persons living in geographically inaccessible locations, orphans, LGBTQI people, children, people who are part of DWD (discrimination based on work/ancestry) communities, and so on” (p. 103), far more scarred than others. In addition, the authors also point to the existence of two types of disparities – the existing forms of inequalities that are exhibiting further cleavages due to the pandemic and concomitant crises, and the new inequalities that emerged specifically due to the pandemic.

The next chapter, “Vaccine diplomacy and the COVID-19 pandemic”, engages with one of the most avidly discussed issues in the world in recent times – how to battle the arrogance of big pharma in the face of global discrepancy in vaccine availability, vaccine literacy, and vaccine hesitancy. One of the hallmarks of this chapter in specific, and the book in general is the question posed here: what about immunization of undocumented migrants? This also points to the title of the chapter that deliberately uses the term “diplomacy” to emphasize the importance of cross-border tensions among nation-states especially during the pandemic. Since the pandemic forced countries to abruptly cut each other off from all sorts of mobilities among people, access to vaccination emerged as a contested terrain for proving one’s citizenship and residence rights in the host country. Consequently, those without papers were the most likely to be left behind. Also, diplomacy and hegemony are relevant topics for understanding the discourse of vaccine legitimacy and vaccine approval. Did Southeast Asia buy most of its vaccines from China or the USA? Which country approved which vaccine? Another set of concerns arises from the way states like Singapore exercised vaccine authoritarianism ensuring that each of its citizens was compulsorily vaccinated. But does that ensure full immunity from a pandemic?

The last two chapters, “The pandemic, disparity and Southeast Asia” and “Are we in the endgame? Lessons learned”, envisage a future beyond the pandemic and locate the broader discussion of pandemic and migration in the context of human rights and global disparity. Chapter 5 addresses the major issues of how the pandemic

affects and impacts the economy of Southeast Asia. The authors argue that because countries like Thailand and Malaysia rely heavily on tourism and export, the global lockdown and slow rate of human mobility later jeopardized their economies. This in turn could affect the rate of remittances to the home countries sent by the migrants. This chapter tries to drive home the point that the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers has consequences not just for the countries of immigration (Southeast Asia in this context) but the home countries too. However, the book ends with the hope that a post-pandemic future would enable migrants to “return to normal” (p. 258) and continue contributing to the global circulation of remittances.

Ullah and Chattoraj’s volume reminds me of Leronzo Guadagno’s (2020) “Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis”, published as a part of the Migration Research Series curated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While Guadagno addressed the pandemic-migration interface from a much broader platform and could only share insights from the initial phase of the global health crisis, Ullah and Chattoraj are able to present a nuanced analysis using empirical data and observation, specifically focusing on Southeast Asia. However, the book does not include all countries of Southeast Asia but focuses mainly on Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, with some discussions on Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

While from an area studies point of view this book remains significant for both researchers and practitioners, it misses out on the larger context of pandemic and mobility for locating a specific discussion on COVID-19 and migrant workers. The coronavirus pandemic was not the first and will perhaps not be the last pandemic that the world will witness. From that standpoint, any attempt at learning from experiences, especially for policymakers, ought to embed the various facets of the crisis within a large spectrum of debates and insights. While this book does not claim to take any historical positioning, it perhaps is still useful to foreground the discussion on past pandemics and migration rather than migration networks.

Historicizing the pandemic-migration debate could also enable a deliberate avoidance of terms like “return to normal”. While it must be acknowledged that the imagination and romanticization of the “normal” remained one of the guiding forces for most people all over the world during the entire period of the pandemic, a generalization of this term would be unfair. Normal cannot be a monolithic category for all migrants. It is crucial we ask, whose normal are we talking about, and what are the parameters of the normal considered here. For example, “normal” for the migrant workers in factories in Singapore was dingy life conditions even before the pandemic whose stories would never come out had it not been for COVID-19. Is a return to that normal romantic? Also, for several categories of migrants, refugees, and displaced people, for example the African students in China, the Nigerian refugees in the European Union, or the inter-state labourers in India who walked miles to reach home, a return to normal may never be possible. Lastly, although the book briefly addresses the vulnerability of non-male migrants, mostly categorizing them as women migrant workers, the feminization of the pandemic (Yavorsky et al., 2021) among non-male migrants in Southeast Asia remains an important subject of investigation and in need of further attention.



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