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"I WANT TO GO HOME, BUT I CAN'T LEAVE": NARRATIVES OF THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA IN BRUNEI DURING COVID-19

Asiyah Kumpoh[*]
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam,
Jalan Tungku Link, BE1410 Brunei Darussalam
E-mail: asiyah.kumpoh@ubd.edu.bn

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ABSTRACT

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused unforgiving circumstances, compromising the socioeconomic well-being of migrant workers. In this context, drawing upon qualitative interviews with South Asian male migrant workers in elementary occupations and sales and service roles in Brunei Darussalam, this paper investigates their lived experiences in the country during the pandemic. This paper employs the conceptual lens of diaspora and moral economy, specifically moral remittance, to reveal their connection to their homeland and the ways they demonstrate their responsibility and obligation to their families. Twenty-three research participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling techniques, and the interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed before the data analysis. Adopting Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis, the interview data were rigorously analysed through the meaning-making process and to explore new themes that underscore the distinctive contribution of the local environment to the lived experiences of the participants. Three prominent themes that capture their experience during the pandemic were identified: employment security, concern for oneself and family, and the responsibility to provide care and protection, which were manifested through remittance and continuing engagement

with their families. The subsequent data analysis also reveals that these themes are indeed conscious expressions of responsibility and moral obligation due to the deteriorating pandemic situation in their home country that exacerbated their families' economic vulnerability and challenging livelihood.

Keywords: COVID-19, Brunei, South Asian diaspora, migrant workers, moral remittance

INTRODUCTION

Ali, a 39-year old Bangladeshi, is a father of twin daughters and a son. In 2008, he came to Brunei after successfully contracting a job as a labourer under a Bruneian employer. He was happy with his job for 12 years and sent regular remittance to his family, including his parents. When the first case of the coronavirus disease or COVID-19 was reported in Brunei in March 2020, which was followed by stringent measures and domestic restrictions issued by Brunei's Ministry of Health (MOH), Ali's employer produced a new working schedule to prevent his workers from going out for work in groups as they usually did daily. Ali had no choice but to agree to the new schedule, which specified reduced daily working hours. For a few months, he received less income that affected the cash remittance to his family. Ali, however, believed that he was still fortunate as he remained employed during the challenging time while some friends in Brunei and other Southeast Asian countries were struggling to make ends meet, with no spare money to send to their families. When Brunei returned to almost normalcy in August 2020, his working arrangement reverted to the pre-COVID-19 schedule. Ali felt an enormous burden had been lifted from his shoulders (personal communication, 4 December 2020).

Ali's personal struggle almost echoes the socioeconomic difficulties experienced by migrant communities worldwide since the unprecedented global spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 in late 2019. The disease which originated from the city of Wuhan in Hubei province, China, in December 2019 led to the biggest public health crisis of this century. The exponential increase in the virus outbreak forced more than 200 countries across the globe to implement containments, travel restrictions, border closures, and other mitigation measures. These countries also recorded several pandemic waves or, as what Zhang et al. (2021) characterise, upward or downward periods of the infection based on the counts and sustained periods of infection cases.

Until December 2021, Brunei has experienced two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first wave, the first COVID-19 case was reported on 9 March 2020 and the next four months were a critical period for the country to bring the pandemic situation under control. During the period, Brunei took stringent containment and preventive measures and high vigilance. Tackling the pandemic outbreak through the whole-of-government approach, all government agencies were mobilised for action (Basir and Rahman 2021). One day after the first reported case, high-risk contacts were required to undergo mandatory self-isolation. On 13 March 2020, in compliance with the Infectious Disease Act (Chapter 204) and its Regulations, public gatherings were prohibited (MOH 2020a). Mosques and public premises such as cinema and sports facilities were temporarily closed, whereas dining establishments were only allowed to provide takeaway service (Ministry of Religious Affairs [MORA] 2020; Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports [MYCS] 2020; MOH 2020b). In the same month, learning institutions were required to activate the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) as the conventional method of learning shifted to e-learning modes (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2020a).

Border closure and travel restrictions for foreign nationals were imposed less than two weeks after the first reported COVID-19 case. On 16 March 2020, the Brunei government announced a nationwide travel ban except for essential travels and inbound passengers were required to undergo self-isolation immediately for 14 days (Prime Minister's Office [PMO] 2020). Except for diplomatic and essential travel, starting 17 March 2020, Brunei implemented a ban of entry for foreign visitors, initially from China, the Republic of Iran and Europe, including the United Kingdom, and later was extended to other countries, including Malaysia and India (MOH 2020c).

On 6 April 2020, the case of two Bangladeshi workers contracting the COVID-19 virus was highlighted in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) press release, following an unverified report on undocumented Bangladeshi workers in the country. The Ministry reported that the two workers were already discharged from the National Isolation Centre of Brunei after undergoing medical treatment, borne by the Brunei Government (MOHA 2020a). In the same press release, employers of foreign workers were reminded to ensure the welfare of their workers, including health conditions and adequate accommodation, and the workers' compliance to the health guidelines of social distancing, cleanliness and immediate medical attention if they become unwell.

Although Brunei did not opt for a total lockdown, the preventive measures successfully controlled the local transmission of the coronavirus two months after the reported first COVID-19 case. The last local case was reported on 9 May 2020, and since then, Brunei only recorded imported cases (a total of 119 imported cases by 30 June 2021) (MOH 2021a). Given the improved condition, mosques were re-opened in May 2020 and later in July 2020, other religious gatherings were allowed, and mosque attendance also returned to normal capacity. In June 2020, 48% of schoolchildren returned to school, announcing the de-escalation stage. A month later, in July 2020, schools and student accommodation resumed their full capacity operations (MOE 2020b, c). By August 2020, a further de-escalation plan allowed, among others, restaurants to resume dine-in operations and cinema to re-open with 80% capacity (MOHA 2020b), which was increased to the maximum capacity in March 2021.

On 3 April 2021, Brunei launched the National Vaccination Programme, which was carried out in several phases, prioritising healthcare and frontline workers, senior citizens and students pursuing studies abroad in the first phase. Under the programme, the vaccination is administered for free, including for all foreigners in the country. The inclusiveness of the vaccination programme indicates the government's seriousness in its effort to curb a further pandemic outbreak despite the zero records of local infection since May 2020. However, there were some indications of vaccine hesitancy among the population (Bandial 2021) that the response towards the vaccination efforts was rather underwhelming. By May 2021, 27,233 individuals and 8,713 individuals received their first and second dose, respectively, amounting to only 2.7% of the target population a month after the launching of the vaccination programme (WHO 2021).

On 7 August 2021, Brunei reported eight new COVID-19 local cases, ending the 457 days of zero community infection. This signifies the start of the second wave of the pandemic in the country. Unlike the gradual infection rate in the first wave, positive cases of COVID-19 increased at an alarming rate that Brunei recorded more than 1,000 cumulative positive cases three weeks after the first report (MOH 2021b).

A range of prevention measures and restrictions were reinstated. Government agencies immediately activated their respective BCP and adopted the work-from-home approach for most employees (PMO 2021a). Similar to the restrictions imposed in the first wave, educational institutions reverted to online learning, mass gatherings were prohibited, and several public facilities, including libraries and sports facilities, were instructed to close

temporarily, and restaurant services were restricted to takeaway and delivery services only. The PMO (2021b) also advised employers of foreign workers to ensure their employees were fully informed of the country's outbreak updates and strictly adhere to tightening control measures, particularly the prohibition of public gathering. The government also took proactive strategies to curb the spread of the pandemic by increasing reliable COVID-19 testing through the setting up of the Brunei COVID-19 Air Lab, first operated on 19 August 2021. Two drive-through swab centres were also opened in the Brunei-Muara District and the Belait District in the same month to support the government's effort to increase the national capacity of COVID-19 testing (MOH 2021c, d).

With the confirmation that the positive cases recorded in the country are of the Delta variant (MOH 2021e), and the recorded new cases reaching almost 2,000 cases at the beginning of September (MOH 2021f), relevant government agencies conducted swab sweep operations to interrupt the spread of the virus nationwide, and this led to the identification of new clusters (MOH 2021g, h, i). The daily official report also identifies several red zone areas in the Brunei-Muara District and the Belait District that recorded more than 80 new cases in the short course of seven days (MOH 2021j).

Amid the concentrated increase of positive cases in 2021 and the bed capacity rate to care COVID-19 patients in isolation centres had reached 78%, the Recovery Operation (*Operasi Pulih*) was announced on 4 October 2021 to increase surveillance and enforcement activities and restrict public movement between 8 pm and 4 am to only emergencies and essential services (PMO 2021c). It was also reported at the same time that there was a steady increase of company dormitories identified as COVID-19 clusters. Out of 371 new COVID-19 clusters identified in the second pandemic wave (from 7 August until 14 December 2021), 84 were staff houses and worker dormitories. Simultaneously, the report of the active COVID-19 cases in October 2021 showed that 54.6% of total positive cases (1,630 cases) were foreigners (MOH 2021k). This new and challenging development replicates what happened to migrant workers in other countries in Southeast Asia, where their dormitories and hostels were increasingly labelled as the epicentres of the COVID-19 outbreaks (Koh 2020; Chattoraj 2021). Thus, with the unabating increase in the number of positive cases involving staff house and foreign workers, it prompted enforcement agencies to conduct urgent environmental and health assessments of workers' housing in the country as well as to broaden the reach of the National Vaccination Programme to include more migrant workers (MOH 2021l).

Understandably, the public demand for the COVID-19 vaccination suddenly surged as the second wave of the pandemic hit the country. The operating hours of vaccination centres were extended in a mere four days after the newly reported cases in August 2021 (MOH 2021m). Additional hours on Sundays were also added for local companies to bring in their employees to the vaccination centres (MOH 2021n). In October 2021, mobile COVID-19 vaccination clinic services were introduced to increase vaccination coverage among the hard-to-reach population in a targeted manner throughout the country (MOH 2021o, p, q). Brunei received vaccine donations from Australia, China, and Singapore (MOH 2021r, s), which adequately permitted the National Vaccination Programme to administer 2,500 doses daily (MOH 2021t). The adequate vaccine supply also allowed the country to administer the third dose for critical workers, which started on 15 October 2021. It was later extended to senior citizens and the general public in December 2021. From 8 November 2021, 37,089 students aged 12 to 17 years old received their first dose, and their second dose was administered a month later (MOE 2021). By the end of November 2021, 80.1% of the population completed two doses of vaccinations, a month earlier than targeted by MOH (MOH 2021u).

After four weeks into the Recovery Operation, doubled by the government's concerted efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic, the number of positive cases decreased to a two-digit number with some slight fluctuations in early November (MOH 2021v). Given the encouraging development, Brunei cautiously announced the Transition Phase (*Fasa Peralihan*) on 19 November 2021, which, among others, allowed the opening of government offices with limited working hours for those with two-dose vaccinations. Higher education institutions were also opened. Antigen Rapid Tests (ART) were conducted fortnightly for all the workforce, and the curfew hours of the movement restriction directive were revised to a 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew. Restrictions on mass public gatherings were eased with an allowance of 50% venue capacity, with any form of events that should abide by the guidelines by the PMO (2021d). On 15 December 2021, Brunei entered the Endemic Phase with 226 active cases and a total number of 15,372 COVID-19 cases since March 2020, with 57 confirmed deaths. Besides, 90.5% of the total population had received two vaccine doses (MOH 2021w).

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON MIGRANT WORKERS

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus caused unforgiving circumstances and job insecurities that severely compromised the socioeconomic well-being of migrant workers (Cohen 2020; Sirkeci and Cohen 2020; Webb et al. 2020; Nicola et al. 2020; Wahab 2020; Jamil and Dutta 2021). As the pandemic significantly disrupted international movement, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported 114 million employment loss with USD3.7 trillion of labour income loss in 2020 (ILO 2021). Low-skilled workers with elementary occupations were the hardest hit by employment loss due to the pandemic, followed by the medium-skilled sales and service workers (ILO 2021). Cohen (2020) pointed out that in the early months of the pandemic outbreak, migrant workers were the most vulnerable group affected by COVID-19. Their existing "insecurity around economics, food, health and the environment as well as personal and communal safety" were increasingly magnified by unexpected disruptions caused by the pandemic that inevitably influenced the actions and decisions of political leaders and decision-makers at points of origins and destinations (Cohen 2020: 406). Ullah et al. (2021a) paid careful attention to the impacts of the immediate imposition of lockdown that resulted in migrants fleeing COVID-19-stricken cities to avoid infection with hovering concerns over hunger and xenophobic outbursts. Domestic helpers who remained employed during the pandemic revealed that they did not have guaranteed access to healthcare (Ullah et al. 2021a). Consequently, the uncertainties caused by the pandemic exacerbated the health and safety concerns of migrants (Sirkeci and Cohen 2020) that the scholarship calls for governments to provide legal, social and benefit protection to migrants, particularly those in informal employments (Webb et al. 2020; Abdul Azeez et al. 2021; Turner et al. 2021).

The current literature also points out the existing challenges already confronted by migrant workers during the pre-pandemic period, including poor living and working conditions, cultural and language barriers, poor social network, xenophobia, and human security-related issues (Moyce and Schenker 2018; Ullah et al. 2020a, b; Finell et al. 2021). They persistently suffered social and economic disparities and even more so during the pandemic as their living conditions were deemed as the breeding grounds for active COVID-19 outbreaks (Koh 2020; Chattoraj 2021). They were also singled out as "the scapegoats for the spread of the virus" (Ullah et al. 2021a: 1).

Abdul Azeez et al. (2021:103) reveal that the severity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women workers in India was "largely framed by socio-economic circumstances and life in the ghettos". Previous studies have long emphasised and debated the role of the social, cultural, economic, and political context in shaping migrants' experiences. Hakak and Al Ariss' (2013) study on migrants' vulnerability at the workplace identifies the impact of country context, particularly immigration policies and cultural differences, on the migrants' workplace experiences. Noor and Shaker (2017) also offer some confirmation on the role of the socio-political context of the host country that exacerbated the workplace discrimination experienced by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Their study examined Malaysia's Employment Act provisions that fail to provide adequate protection to foreign workers.

Thus, this article aims to examine the lived experiences of South Asian male migrants in Brunei, focusing on the Indians and Bangladeshis and the ways their experiences are shaped by the unique contextual environment of Brunei, particularly during the pandemic time. The research objectives focus on three main themes relevant to the examination of the migrants' diasporic experiences:

1. Their connection to the homeland, specifically on the ways they connect and maintain the connection, particularly during the pandemic,
2. The ways they demonstrate their sense of responsibility, a theme which naturally brings the interview conversation to the third theme, and
3. Moral remittance which also revolves around the questions of obligation and responsibility.

Statistically, more than 38 million South Asians were residing abroad in 2017 (ILO 2018), driven by employment as the primary factor for their international movement (Ullah et al. 2020b). It was also reported that Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries, including Brunei, are the main receiving countries for low-skilled and semi-skilled South Asians, whereas the professionals concentrate in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania (ILO 2018). The 2019 statistics show that the Indians and Bangladeshis make up 32.2% of the total foreign workforce in Brunei, collectively the largest group of migrant workers in Brunei. The statistics further show 12,841 foreign workers from Bangladesh and 10,633 from India, and 399 Pakistanis in Brunei that year (Department of Labour 2020).

This study, as explained in the subsequent section, considers the Indians and Bangladeshis in Brunei are perceived as diasporic communities, primarily due to the ways they operate their diasporic spaces that continually articulate the notion of homeland and identity, which specifically for the Indians, led to the emergence of Brunei's style of "Little India" (Ullah and Kumpoh 2019). As illustrated further in this study, this geographical rootedness leads to the formation of affective bonds beyond kinship relations and expressions of multiple senses of responsibility and belonging that further demonstrate diasporic attachment with their country of origin. The expressions of responsibility and belonging the participants demonstrate towards their families and homeland will also be framed within the concept of moral economy, specifically moral remittances, which is equally intertwined with the expectations of obligation and responsibility. This concept of moral remittances is put into perspective to complement the concept of the diaspora to reveal how the expressions and expectations of obligation and responsibility, as articulated by the participants of this study, become more pronounced and acquired heightened significance during the pandemic.

CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS: DIASPORA AND MORAL REMITTANCES

The term "diaspora" has become increasingly varied and multidimensional. It has extended beyond the early typology of diaspora, which refers to movements of people, be it forced or voluntary, from one place to another, and these people were held together by common historical, ethnic, and religious factors (Sheffer 1986). Since the 1990s, the scholarship has taken an expansive and complex articulation and conceptualisation of the term that considers diaspora as "metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court…" (Safran 1991: 83). In many ways, the expansive categorisation of diaspora effectively accommodates the growing diverse realities and life experiences shaped by the histories of human mobility. Due to the myriad of diasporic categories, emerging discourses of "homeland", construction and deconstruction of identities of the diasporic categories, and diasporic policies became more powerful and dominant (Cohen 2008).

Berns-McGown (2008: 6) focuses on the importance of diaspora as "a space of connections – connections in two dimensions", and one of the dimensions must be the homeland of the diaspora. Thus, albeit the different conceptualisation of the term "diaspora", what ties these differences together is that each conceptualisation and definition demonstrate diaspora's active connection and attachment to their homeland, be it an actual or imagined one (Safran 1991; Skrbiš 1997; Dufoix 2015). Related to this perspective, Werbner (2002: 121) demonstrates that attachment to homeland forms a robust basis for emotional and symbolic expressions of belonging and "ties of co-responsibility across the boundaries of empires, political communities or…nations". Although Werbner (2002) distinctively defines such co-responsibility in a political sense or specifically for highly politicised conditions, multiple dimensions of belonging and responsibility have transcended beyond the political articulation of attachment to a homeland. For instance, Abdelhady (2008: 62) explores the dynamics of diaspora-homeland connection of the Lebanese in New York and reveals that one of the most indispensable expressions of connection and belonging is in the form of "continuous communication with family and friends, or keeping oneself informed about political, social, or cultural events in the homeland". Others increased their involvement in cultural activities and formal organisation "which they understood as a connection to their homeland" (Abdelhady 2008: 62).

Bringing this conceptual reflection of diaspora closer to this study, the participants' lived experiences will be framed within this specific concept. As demonstrated by existing studies, migrants' sense of responsibility and connection inevitably plays out rather strongly as they seek an equal amount of stability and security both at their new (temporary) home and homeland (Chattoraj and Gerharz 2019; Ullah et al. 2021b). Moreover, the reasons and implications of such connection during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown by the findings of this study, are unique and specific to the challenging circumstances (Aslam 2020; Finell et al. 2021).

Fast-growing literature on migration equally pays attention to remittances which have increasingly become one of the direct corollaries of migration. The empirical literature suggests the significance of remittance flow as a notable factor for social and economic growth of recipient countries, including the alleviation of poverty, the attainment of social status and the retirement funds for migrant workers (de Haas 2005; Page and Plaza 2006; Naiditch and Vranceanu 2011; Azam et al. 2016; Chowdhury and

Chakraborty 2021). For the South Asian region specifically, the estimated remittance flow to the region was approximately $131 billion in 2018, whereas, in 2019, 40% of the global remittance was directed to South Asia (Ullah and Haque 2020). The culture of dependency upon remittance by migrants' families have also been canvassed by existing literature (Stark and Lucas 1988; Odihi 2003; Koc and Onan 2004), a culture that could breed an excessive reliance on remittance and curtails the motivation of other household members to acquire own income (Åkesson 2011).

Due to such significance of remittances for both senders and recipients, remittances are no longer simply seen as cash flow and monetary assistance to their families. Stevanovic (2012: 1) argues that remittances have increasingly been conceptualised within "a moral economy of giving and sharing". Based on her study on male Bangladeshi migrants in New York, Stevanovic (2012) found that one of the primary reasons for the migrants to send remittance to their family is to maintain their role as the main provider for their family while maintaining the patriarchal position. They also perceived that their economic responsibility is critical in maintaining family cohesion. Such experiences reflect strongly the concept of the moral economy, particularly in consideration of, first, the communication reciprocity between senders and recipients of remittance, second, moral obligations shouldered by the migrants, and third, the ways the expectations of rights and obligations invoke their emotions of guilt and shame (Warnecke-Berger 2017). Similar to Stevanovic's (2012) study, this research is also based on a male-oriented data set. It is important to find out whether the findings of this research in relation to moral remittance would be distinctive to Brunei's context.

Hence, the conceptual lens of diaspora and moral remittances will frame the inquiry into the experiences of the South Asian diaspora in Brunei during the pandemic. Recent studies and news reports indicate that there have been intensified diasporic communication and identification with homeland since the outbreak of the pandemic due to the worsening conditions in the home country of the diaspora (Finell 2021; Kar 2021; Singh 2021) and family's reciprocal concerns on migrants' safety (Gulvady 2021) as well as personal reasons including the fear of death and being stranded in a foreign land (Aslam 2020). Thus, this paper specifically focuses on the ways the migrants connect with their home country and families, express their sense of responsibility, and fulfil the expectations of economic and moral obligations during the pandemic.

DATA AND METHOD

This study adopted qualitative in-depth interviews with 23 South Asian male migrant workers recruited via purposive and snowball sampling who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. Eighteen participants have been working in Brunei for more than 15 years, whereas the remaining five have at least 10 years of working experience in the country. The length of their stay in Brunei was carefully considered as a recruitment criterion to ensure that the participants have rich diasporic experiences relevant to this study. They all possess adequate communicative *Bahasa Brunei* (Brunei's lingua franca). This linguistic proficiency not only eased the communication between the researcher and the participants but also facilitated the researcher's rapport with the participants and their overall research involvement (Fryer 2019), which proved to be extremely useful when the second phase of the data collection was conducted during the second wave of the pandemic.

The interviews were carried out in two phases to correspond to the two waves of the pandemic in Brunei. The first phase of interviews was carried out physically from September 2020, as soon as the COVID-19 restrictions in Brunei were gradually lifted in August 2020. The participants were given a thorough explanation of the aims of the study and written informed consents were obtained from all the participants. They also consented to the use of pseudonyms for the excerpts used in this research to protect their anonymity and the confidentiality of the interview data. For the first phase, the participant recruitment and interviews were completed in May 2021 once the data saturation point was reached.

The second phase took place in late October and November 2021, two months after the outbreak of the second wave of the pandemic. In this phase, the participants were approached through telephone calls to invite them to be interviewed once again and share their experiences during the second wave of the pandemic. As the researcher is personally known to them, all the participants responded positively and consented to be recruited for the study's second phase. Due to the pandemic restrictions which remained in place in the months of October and November 2021, the interviews with the participants were conducted through telephone calls at their convenience. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed prior to the data analysis.

The interview questions primarily explored the lived experiences of the South Asian diaspora in Brunei since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the three interrelated research objectives raised earlier. The interview also explored the participants' experiences before the pandemic. Such comprehensive exploration is crucial when the findings of Hakak and Al Ariss (2013), Noor and Shaker (2017), and Abdul Azeez et al. (2021) are considered that demonstrate the implications of institutional, policy, and socioeconomic environments of the host country on the living experiences of migrant workers. Specific interview questions were also formulated within the conceptual frameworks of the research (diaspora and moral remittance) and anchored to the findings of past studies. Such thematic questions not only enable researchers to elicit relevant knowledge from participants, but "the more structured the interview situation is, the easier, the later conceptual structuring of the interview analysis will be" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018: 64).

In light of the nature of the data and the research task, thematic data analysis was extensively employed to analyse the narrative accounts of the research participants. Adopting Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis, the process of analysing data was taken in the form of an *analytic* process. This means that the interview data were not merely organised and summarised according to the established themes derived from the conceptual framework of diaspora and moral remittance, such as communication with homeland and regular remittance. The interview transcripts were repeatedly read and coded. Any topics that frequently emerged in the transcript but did not fit into the established themes were noted and categorised as new themes or sub-themes (Bogdan and Taylor 1975). The identified themes and sub-themes were compared and contrasted, extensively interpreted, and made sense of so that this research would not only see and find the obvious (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The meaning-making process is highly critical at this stage as it "generate[s] more details than had been verbally voiced" by the participants (Kumpoh 2011: 99). The data analysis also actively explored new themes that could potentially underscore the distinctive contributions of the local environment to the lived experiences of the South Asians in Brunei. Hence, the most prominent themes identified in this study that significantly capture their diasporic experiences during the pandemic are employment security, concern for oneself and family, and responsibility to provide care and protection for their families.

EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

One of the key findings of this study is the retainment of employment and income among the research participants amid the two waves of the pandemic in Brunei. They reported that they did not face major difficulties in securing their current jobs, which were low-skilled elementary occupations such as labourer, construction worker, cleaner, and sales and service roles as a shopkeeper, shop assistant, tailor, and barber. This finding contrasts with previous studies that have reported unemployment and loss of income as the main challenges faced by migrant workers during the pandemic (Guadagno 2020; Wahab 2020; Bhandari et al. 2021).

One of the plausible explanations for the employment security enjoyed by migrant workers is Brunei's 2009 Employment Order that enforces protection for workers, and in this case, migrant workers. Contract workers are protected by the Employment Order that prevents employees' layoffs and termination from employment before completing a full contract without sufficient ground to do so (Department of Labour n.d.). In addition, further employment security may also be extended to those who completed their fixed-term contract. They can apply for a three-month extension of their employment pass and subsequent extensions as long as their employers recommend them. In December 2021, considering international movement restrictions, Brunei's COVID-19 Steering Committee permits foreign workers whose work contracts have expired to apply and be granted a new work contract. This means the requirement of the obligatory return to the home country after the expiration of the work contract was temporarily waived to provide further employment security to the foreign workforce in the country (Othman 2021).

Ahmed, a 54-year-old labourer from Bangladesh who has been working in Brunei for 23 years, decided to continue working even though he really wanted to return to Bangladesh. His decision had nothing to do with international travel restrictions or quarantines. It was more of the realisation that Ahmed is now the sole breadwinner for his family. His son, a software engineer, returned to their family home in Tangail, bringing with him his wife and two small children after he lost his job at a computer company in Dhaka in May 2020:

> If I had my way, I really wanted to go home, but I could not leave Brunei now. I have to stay here and work harder, so I can send enough money to them [his family] (Ahmed, labourer).

However, it is not uncommon for workers to receive reduced income due to fewer working hours during the pandemic. The research participants reported that they received less or irregular salaries, particularly during the early months of the pandemic waves. Almost all participants faced a similar condition as Ali, where their employer observed the permitted attendance capacity on the working site. The employer gave every worker a fair share of working time which guaranteed job security, but at the same time, because their working time was reduced, it affected their income. Only two participants who worked as barber did not face a reduction in their working hours. However, as they received fewer visitors in the first three months of the pandemic, they had to take a pay cut as their employer made a minimal profit that barely covered the premise's rent and other expenditures. Interestingly, when the second wave of the pandemic hit Brunei, almost all participants shared that they were more prepared to deal with the imposition of strict measures that reduced their working hours and salary. They also repeatedly expressed their gratitude for the ways the Brunei government handled the pandemic and that they did not lose their job in both waves.

It is worthwhile to mention that, in the second phase of the data collection, four research participants underwent the mandatory 14-day quarantine due to their close contact with COVID-19 positive cases. When asked what worried them the most at that point, none of them answered job loss as their main concern, as they knew that they could return to work once they completed their mandatory quarantine period. Instead, they were more concerned that they could also be tested positive for the virus that would inevitably lengthen their quarantine period, and the more pressing and lingering thought was that the COVID-19 virus would negatively affect their overall health and well-being. As our conversation progressed, the participants kept shifting the topic to discuss their family and why they were in Brunei. They feared that they could not regain their former health and strength if they contracted the virus, even if they recovered from it. They were also genuinely concerned that they would not be able to see their family again if they contracted the fast-spreading Delta variant and succumbed to it.

It is unmistakable that the projective perception of employment security and the notion of family and responsibility that surfaced multiple times during the interviews with the participants is a recognisable expression of their diasporic connection to their homeland. For the participants, the employment security amid the pandemic, a distinctive scenario to Brunei's context, permits them to continue to fulfil their responsibility to their families

during the challenging times. The lingering concern for their own health and the increasing fear of contracting the virus were also equally driven by their prioritising their family over and above their own well-being, as discussed further below.

CONCERN FOR ONESELF AND FAMILY

In the first few weeks after the first reported COVID-19 case in Brunei in March 2020, the participants reported that they were at loss as they were bombarded with multiple instructions from their employers, for instance, to temporarily suspend regular social gatherings with their friends, to make sure the cleanliness of their accommodations and to report immediately for any symptoms of colds or fever. Their employers also advised them to follow daily updates from the MOH and other relevant agencies via social media or the official website of the national broadcasting agency, Radio and Television Brunei. Some participants also shared that the availability of instant messaging platforms effectively disseminated COVID-19 contents and kept them connected with their friends in other districts in Brunei during the initial period of the pandemic. The research participants became extra zealous with cleanliness and health, and this new behaviour was adopted even more after the reports of two Bangladeshi workers contracting the coronavirus in April 2020.

The above finding is consistent with previous studies where migrant workers became more cautious with their health conditions and adopted new healthy behaviours (Mia and Griffiths 2020; Abdul Azeez et al. 2021; Bhandari et al. 2021). The research participants of this study reported that even a minor headache that was previously considered a trivial condition could now cause a sense of insecurity. This study also discovers an interesting finding distinctive to Brunei's environment. The Muslim participants reported that they observed His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei's advice to continually seek Allah's protection in mitigating the pandemic crisis. Complying with the gathering restrictions, they spent their individual time reciting Quran verses and prayers and sought protection for themselves and their families. One participant specifically prayed for Brunei to heal from the pandemic so that they could go back to work as usual.

When MOH mandated the use of the Bruhealth application which was launched in May 2020, there was a general consensus among the research participants that they made sure that they would not fall ill. If they

experienced early symptoms, they turned to home remedies for recovery. They would only seek proper medical treatment if they really had to. They shared their fear of getting a red code on their Bruhealth application, which indicates an instruction for self-isolation. If this happened, it would definitely lead to a loss of valuable working hours, subsequently affecting their income.

When the second wave of the pandemic spread quickly in the second week of August 2021, they were initially calm and less anxious as they thought they knew what to expect from it. However, a staggering increase in the number of workers' accommodations identified as new COVID-19 clusters inevitably heightened their fears that they could be the next one to be infected. All participants in this research live in rented accommodation with 10 to 15 co-workers, and some of their co-workers were diagnosed positive with the virus. They knew well what happened to their home country after several waves of the pandemic, the immense pressures after job loss and unemployment, and the lost hope of returning to normal lives. Some participants even reported that the sight of white vans and buses (referring to the MOH's ambulance and emergency services) could leave them feeling anxious and fearful.

Delving further into their concern, this study found that the participants' worry was intertwined with the fear of financial uncertainty if they were infected with COVID-19. They felt that anything could happen during this uncertain period of the pandemic. Analysing through the interview data, and as mentioned earlier, this fear was driven by their observation of the impacts of the pandemic at home:

> We watched YouTube and checked our Facebook all the time to get the latest news from India. It was worrying about learning that more people lost their jobs due to a lockdown and many businesses were out. What if Brunei declares a complete lockdown? Would we just be staying at home? Who would feed us? (Shah, janitor).

> Even those with good jobs got laid off. It made me think, what hope do I have? (Rakib, labourer).

The literature provides substantial evidence that the constant worry towards family at home among the diaspora is common and understandable, primarily due to the emotional engagement with their homeland (Doraï 2002; Abdelhady 2008; Kar 2021). This study detects that the participants' concern towards their family was more pronounced during the pandemic,

particularly in consideration of the condition in South Asia worsened at the turn of 2021, with the third wave of the pandemic hitting hard India and Bangladesh in March and April 2021, respectively:

> The situation has worsened in my district. As many people returned home due to job loss, suddenly, many more thefts happened in the area. I always remind my parents and my wife to make sure they lock the windows all the time. I asked my brother to put more bolts on the door. I just wish that I was there to protect them (Sameer, construction worker).

Due to their concern, they increasingly relied on reports from popular social networking sites and platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube. The virtual immediacy in information dissemination of these online platforms enabled the participants to receive latest pandemic-related news much faster than their family members at home.

However, there were instances when information overload could also lead to excessive concern and restlessness. Narun shared that he was constantly worried about his ageing parents and other family members even though his home village in Pabna, Bangladesh, recorded one of the lowest COVID-19 cases in the country. As the third wave of the pandemic hit Bangladesh in March 2021, he was frightened by the dramatic increase in fatalities in Bangladesh which caused him sleepless nights, constantly worrying for the well-being of his family.

It was also not uncommon for the participants to highlight that they enjoyed the safe living condition in Brunei. This finding is consistent with Abdul Azeez et al. (2021), where the host country's socioeconomic circumstances significantly influence the magnitude of concern experienced by the migrant workers. Even when Brunei showed a worrying uptrend in the number of positive COVID-19 cases in the third wave in October 2021, participants still believed Brunei was in a better condition compared to their home country.

However, within the same conversation, they also reported moments of guilt, notably when the pandemic situation in their home country took a turn for the worse, particularly during the third wave of the pandemic in India and Bangladesh, causing all sorts of disruptions and problems to their families. This contributes to the feeling of disempowerment as they were unable to provide direct protection to their families:

> If I could, I would bring my wife and the kids to Brunei. I'm constantly worried about their safety and health. Unfortunately, I cannot do anything at the moment except to pray for them (Ali, labourer).

> There were times I did not feel like eating or having a good meal because it would remind me of my children. Have they eaten well this morning? My wife always told me that they had enough food at home, but how would I know this for sure? What if she lied just to make me feel better? (Hasan, barber).

The above narrative clearly demonstrates the moral dilemma faced by the participants. They endorsed and enjoyed the safe living condition in Brunei during the pandemic that simultaneously seemed to imbue them with feelings of guilt and disempowerment, intertwined with the increased concern for their families. As demonstrated below, such greater concern parallels to the intensified sense of responsibility that generates a deep feeling of moral obligation, another interrelated theme inherent in the diasporic experience of the South Asian migrants in Brunei.

RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL OBLIGATION

Another important theme emerging from the data analysis is the notion of responsibility and moral obligation to provide care and protection through two identified ways: remittance and continuing engagement with home and family. As shown in the following discussion, the sense of responsibility towards their household is a common experience for the migrants. It was heightened amid the worsening pandemic in their respective home country.

Chowdhury and Chakraborty (2021) highlight the increasing importance of remittance during the pandemic, as foreign workers faced challenging socioeconomic realities. They found a substantial volume of remittance flow globally a few months after the outbreak of COVID-19, apparently due to "the increased need of sending money to the families as the recipient countries were fighting hard to survive the pandemic" (Chowdhury and Chakraborty 2021: 42).

The findings of this study concur with Chowdhury and Chakraborty's (2021) observation. All research participants emphasised that it has now become their utmost responsibility to ensure a continued healthy remittance flow to their family, even if it means that they would have to put aside their own needs. As many participants received reduced income in the first

two months of the two waves of the pandemic in Brunei, their financial remittance was at risk. At the same time, however, the dependency on their remittances became much more profound during the pandemic as other family members could not work and lost their respective sources of income. Sadiq, a shop assistant from India, shared that his two brothers who live with his parents lost their jobs in May 2020, and his brother-in-law suffered the same fate a month later. They all now heavily depend on Sadiq's remittances, previously only for his small family of three and his parents. Now, the remittances had to be extended to cover the living costs of his brothers and their families. Similarly, Devan, who works at a bakery shop, was grateful that the pandemic had not significantly affected his job and salary. Nevertheless, he could not exempt himself from occasionally feeling anxious. Devan has been the sole source of income for his family as his father lost his job as a cleaner at a grocery store back home in March 2020. In October 2021, he reported that his younger brother now works as a construction worker, which slightly alleviated some financial pressure off him.

The findings of this study also indicate some participants extended the sphere of their responsibility to include their neighbours and provided some protection against the adverse impacts of the pandemic:

> Whenever my wife cooks rice and the smell goes out, little kids would be standing at our door, peeping inside. She knows some of them had not eaten a proper meal, maybe for two or three days. My wife would give them a plate of rice each to bring home. I know it's not my responsibility to feed them, but it is not nice to let your neighbours and their kids went to sleep hungry that night (Rakib, labourer).

Analysing further the participants' narratives, it is clear that the pandemic has broadened the meanings of remittances both for the senders and the recipients. Ullah and Alkaff (2018) identify what they perceive as biological remittances and other existing identification associated with remittances, such as social, political, and personal remittances and community remittances. The above findings concur with Stevanovic's (2012) conceptualisation of moral economy. The research participants employ the concept of moral remittance to fulfil their multiple responsibilities and kinship obligations through cash remittances. This also helps them manage and resolve their guilt and feelings of powerlessness (Warnecke-Berger 2017).

It is also found that the emphasis on moral remittance was intensified mainly due to Brunei's context, which the participants deemed as faring

better than their homeland. Such context effectively permits the South Asians to put their family first before their own needs. It is known that the pandemic period, without doubt, is difficult, if not the most difficult, for the research participants, physically and emotionally. However, as illustrated above, all research participants remained employed amid the two waves of the pandemic in Brunei, and such employment security during the pandemic is rarely identified in previous studies. In addition, there were no indications of discrimination, as commonly experienced by foreign workers in other countries. Adil, a 41-year-old barber, candidly shared that the Bruneians were busy minding their own business most of the time, and they were even more so during the pandemic.

It is also important to point out that, with the strong sense of morality enabled by extended remittance during the pandemic, the migrants experienced denser connectivity with their homeland. The feelings of compassion for their family and neighbours led to genuine acts of kindness and generous behaviours towards them. Based on this perspective, the South Asian diaspora in Brunei has demonstrated that their diaspora experience does not only grow from the notion of kinship but is also rooted in compassion and empathy.

As their sphere of responsibility and moral obligation seemed to grow during the pandemic, the research participants expressed willingness to undertake random jobs such as cleaning and repairing to earn extra income. They also shared that they lowered their living costs to save more money for their families. Interestingly, they preferred fresh food and home-cooked meals as it did not cost too much to buy fresh products in Brunei. Ali shared that he and his five housemates would chip in BND$5 each to buy fresh fish, vegetables and a packet of rice for a week's supply. He also added that their Bruneian neighbours also offered them food on random days, which they were grateful for.

A further investigation into the remittance narratives reveals that the South Asian diasporic community in Brunei has its own domestic support system:

> When I stepped on a nail that caused a deep wound on my left foot last year (June 2020), I was given medical leave for about a month. My housemates spared their savings so I could send BND$350 to my family, as I usually do every month. My wife didn't know I was out of work at that time. But I didn't want her to worry about me. I know she was already stressing out over the lockdown situation in our district (Muhsin, construction worker).

Conventionally, family and kinship provide a support system and a safety network for migrant workers. However, in the case of the South Asian diaspora in Brunei, as illustrated above, their countrymen provided care and protection during the turbulent time. When asked for the reason as to why Muhsin's friends were so willing to help when the fact that everyone was facing similar financial difficulties, Khaleed, Muhsin's friend, gave a straightforward yet meaningful answer:

> Who else would help him (Muhsin)? If we come together and help one another, it will give us strength and robust support, especially during difficult times (Khaleed, shopkeeper).

Another expression of responsibility and moral obligation is the participants' continuing interaction with household members. Many were appreciative of the digital technology, their access to it and the telecommunication service in Brunei that allowed them to keep in touch with family members and friends. This significantly demonstrates the fact that internet connectivity has become the material infrastructure upon which contemporary experiences of the diaspora are built and deepened during the pandemic. Interestingly, although the participants carefully spent within their means to ensure adequate remittance every month, they did not mind spending approximately BND$10 per month for telephone bills and internet service. Some participants shared that they even sent extra money to their families to purchase mobile devices that can support and set up video calls so that they can see their families virtually.

Similar to the role of remittances, such regular interaction with families is a substitution of direct and physical care and protection:

> I check my mobile phone every hour now. I get worried if my wife does not send me text messages for more than two hours. Things happen so fast back home (India). My uncle suffered a minor stroke just last night, but they couldn't send him to the hospital. They couldn't afford the transport cost, let alone the hospital bill. Last week, my neighbour died due to coronavirus. There was an atmosphere of fear in the neighbourhood (Adil, barber).

Those with ageing parents expressed a greater need to regularly call and check on them, a clear manifestation of a stronger sense of family obligation. One participant shared that the first thing he would do after work is to check the online news, convey the news to his parents as they were not able to keep themselves updated:

> My parents are illiterate and have no special phones (smartphones). So, I call them every day and share the latest news from Bangladesh. Once my father told me that they had been informed by the head of the district that there would be a vaccine available soon. I told him that was a lie. I don't see any news online that reports about the distribution of vaccines in our district (Shah, janitor).

Taken together, the participants' technologically enhanced engagement with home and family allowed them to be "at home" while being away from home, fulfilling their responsibility to provide care and protection to their household. This finding also leads us to see that the continuing digital engagement effectively dilutes their physical absence from home, lessens their family's vulnerability, and in many ways, buffers the overall impacts of the pandemic.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

There is no doubt that the pandemic led to adverse implications on migrant workers in Brunei. Previous studies recommend receiving countries to provide financial relief to migrant workers to alleviate the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on the group (Mia and Griffiths 2020; Abdul Azeez et al. 2021). However, Brunei's context offers the migrants distinctive diasporic experiences that in many ways guaranteed them employment security during the pandemic.

At the same time, the lived experiences of the migrant workers studied in this research subtly highlight the potentially reduced sense of welfare security, particularly the quality and safety of their living conditions. The official and local news reports did identify migrant workers, alongside private companies and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME), as the vulnerable groups that were hard hit by the pandemic (MOFE 2020; Han 2021; Mohamad 2021). Thus, there should be a customised monitoring system to observe employers' management of migrant workers and make sure the workers have access to quality welfare care and accommodation in normal circumstances and even more so in times of crisis such as pandemic and disaster. In addition, as Brunei is one of the net migrant importers in Southeast Asia (Hickey et al. 2013), there should be effective government enforcement to ensure employers' compliance with relevant regulatory frameworks.

Thus, there should be a professional support system in place that can address the psychological issues and the mental health of migrant workers in Brunei. It is worthwhile to mention that, during the pandemic, the MOH launched a mental health helpline, *Talian Harapan* 145, to provide reliable access to mental health services to the population. However, none of the research participants was aware of such online support. They were also in the opinion that such support is exclusively for the local population only. However, the findings of this study have shown that migrant workers were also exposed to emotional and psychological challenges. Their psychological vulnerability was evidently amplified by the increasingly legitimate concerns over their health and the well-being of their significant others in their home country. Further studies should be carried out to evaluate the actual implication and magnitude of such mental health issues confronting migrant workers before proper support mechanisms can be recommended and put in place.

FINAL THOUGHT

Without a doubt, the challenging pandemic led to a strong notion of responsibility and moral obligation, generating a remarkably distinct sense of belonging among the South Asians in Brunei. This is somewhat expected. No matter how long they have been away from their homeland, diaspora always maintains a significant connection with their country of origin (Ullah and Kumpoh 2019). The findings of this study reveal that the South Asians demonstrate their sense of belonging through their concern, particularly for their families and, subsequently, the sense of responsibility and moral obligation to provide care and protection through two distinctive means, i.e., remittance and continuing virtual engagement during the pandemic.

This study also provides significant insights into the lives of the migrant workers, which remain understudied in the context of Brunei. Given that the pandemic situation in the country does not resemble the common experiences of most countries in the world, Brunei presents a unique case. More importantly, this study gives the research participants a voice that allows us to cultivate a profound understanding of the social reality of the South Asian diaspora in Brunei.

Besides, this study shows how the COVID-19 pandemic influences migration and migrants' behaviour. Torn between choice and obligation, the findings of this study have demonstrated that the research participants

chose not to leave Brunei due to the urgent sense of responsibility and moral obligation to their families. Their migration was no longer a personal choice. It has become a necessity due to economic hardship. However, they are not in any way passive victims of the pandemic. Nor do they see the increasing dependency of their family as an additional burden on their lives. Given the favourable context of Brunei, they can assure financial sustainability in the host country, permitting them to meet the needs and concerns of their families at home.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Interview data were gained through informed consent of respondents in accordance with procedures standard in the Universiti Brunei Darussalam social science research.

NOTE

* Asiyah Kumpoh is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Her current research and publications focus on conversion narratives, diasporas, identity and culture in Brunei Darussalam.

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