



Social and Cultural Aspects of Migrant Labourers in the Gulf

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Abstract: The GCC countries can be seen as a region of extreme mobility, be it voluntary or forced. It is one of the largest recipients of labour migrants in the entire world. The history of migration inflows in the GCC countries can be segregated into pre-oil and post-oil periods. Mass migration to GCC countries started in the 1960s, however, post the discovery of oil reserves and the oil boom in 1970, these GCC countries became the magnets for international migration attracting all sorts of people towards them. Moreover, the Arabian Gulf has a long history of global connectivity and interaction with its neighbouring countries. So, the oil boom in the area had pushed rapid development, which further necessitated a demand for labour. Due to small population sizes in the Gulf, GCC countries relied on imported labour to balance out their local labour deficits, which have primarily been sourced from the Indian subcontinent and South Asia. According to the data released by UNDESA in 2019, there were 35 million international migrants in GCC Countries (ILO 2021). Saudi Arabia stands first, receiving more than 13 million migrants among other GCC Countries. Moreover, more than 9 million migrants (almost 50 per cent of India's total migrants) reside in GCC countries, which is again more than 25% of total Gulf migrants directly coming from India. Hence, the large number of migrants in these Gulf countries, bring not only their skills but also their social, gender, cultural, religious and political identities. In this regard, this paper tries to highlight the issues of labour migration in the GCC countries peeking through the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of labour migrants.

Index Terms – Migrant Labourers, Socio-cultural Discrimination, Cultural Segregation, GCC Countries.

I. INTRODUCTION

The majority of migrants come from poor backgrounds and rural areas. They are not highly qualified, but they are technical and skilled labours. The most apparent reason for migration is the wage differential between the salaries paid for the work at home and salaries given for the same job in GCC Countries.

The skilled and professional workers category comprises about 30%, while 70% are semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Pethiyagoda 2017). Though migrant labourers build today's world-class megacities of the Gulf, the living conditions are very harsh and shocking, which is an outcome of the social and cultural policies of the region.

The cultural confrontation between Immigrants and locals can easily be seen everywhere in the GCC Countries, particularly in the labour market sectors. There is a complete separation between migrants and natives most of the time. The ethnic goods component sends signals to the migrant about the possibility of living in a culturally similar environment. But certain social, personal and constitutional restrictions always keep them separated from the native culture. And this separation and segregation give the sense of Arab cultural superiority over foreign culture.

Here are some examples directly leading to this cultural complexity, exposing the reality of treatment being given to migrant workers in the GCC Countries. Social and cultural issues of the Gulf have multidimensional factors about Job, Wage, race, colour, region, linguistic identity, social and religious segregation etc. Let's try to understand every dimension by putting them into the social and cultural domain.

Why such a massive migration from South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, etc.)? Kamarava and Babar explain the scenario from their perspective, saying that- Asians are less of an ideological threat than their Arab neighbours, Asians easily tolerate lower wages, they are easier to lay off, easier to segregate. As 70 per cent of the jobs in the Gulf are fulfilled by skilled and unskilled labourers, directly coming from South Asia and other developing countries of Africa, there is an economic reason behind this in terms of cheap labour. However, another hidden reality is the so-called 'bad' job profiles available in demand. Infrastructure and construction works are not well suited for native populations.

The Gulf continues witnessing the emergence of multi-tiered societies, where locals are situated in the top-tier and migrant populations occupy the lowest tier (Mehran & Babar 2014). So this division clearly shows the structural inequality among the people in the Gulf.

Migrants are treated as second-class citizens in GCC countries. As these countries do not have citizenship provisions (except Kuwait, though almost impossible), nationals do not want cultural assimilations. That is why they always act to be socially and culturally superior. There is a vast divide between nationals and migrants in the Gulf. And this divide between citizens and migrants is physical, but the boundaries between the two are more defined in terms of social and cultural sense.

Issues regarding settlement and social exclusion

Their living conditions or the kind of settlements provided to the migrant workers are shocking and heartbreaking. Workers are settled into labour camps situated in the city's periphery, which are entirely segregated from the city centre geographically and socially. Their accommodation distance from the city and the eyes of nationals reflects how conscious native people are to keep their culture separated from the migrant workers. And this is the reality of the other side of the luxury lifestyle of the Gulf nations.

Their settlements are systematically promoted by the government's marginalisation, meaning that migrants are deprived not only by the nationals but also by the governments. In his article "Dubai: Gilded Cage", Sayed Ali mentions that the government also tacitly promotes the marginalisation of migrant workers through legal codes. Even if companies or employers desire to house their employees in the heart of the cities with acceptable living conditions, the government makes it difficult. In 2006, the Dubai govt cracked down on migrant bachelors living in family-designated neighbourhoods. When a construction firm in Dubai headed by a European family decided to house its employees in the Jumeira area, officials from the municipality evicted the migrant workers. They encouraged them to find housing in a labour camp (Ali 2010).

Andrew Gardner, in his book, also talks about the peripheral settlements of migrant workers. He argues that the reason behind peripheral settlements of migrant labourers is to completely cut off their often visit to the heart of the cities. Public transportation generally does not serve these areas, and taxi fares to the towns are incredibly high. Even if the labourers could afford the taxi fares, their long and arduous work and little time off are obstacles for workers to venture to the cities. Because of the exhausting nature of their work, labourers tend to find small tea shops near their camps/settlements to spend their short time (Gardner 2010). And that is the reason behind intentionally settling migrant labourers far away from the core of societies (peripheral areas of the cities) to avoid cultural assimilation. Henceforth, the way migrant workers are settled or accommodated in the periphery of the community as an inferior group reflects their rigid class system based on their superior cultural complexity, which is, I think, not less than the caste complexity that prevailed in Indian society.

In her article, *Migrant Labour in the Arabian Gulf: A Case Study of Dubai, UAE*, Sara Hamza has also written about how the migrants are entirely segregated from mainstream social life. She explains that- "The GCC Countries have created a paradox of crafting ultramodern luxurious cities for locals and westerners to enjoy while denying these same luxuries to the migrant population that makes it all possible. GCC Govts have created a legal system that systematically denies rights to migrant workers while promoting extensive and lucrative benefits for nationals.

This allows the Gulf countries to appear as modern, cosmopolitan and developed. However, one does not need much time to see the contrasts between citizens and migrants (Hamza 2015). The details mentioned above are enough to explain how GCC Countries legally perpetuate the denial of rights and hassle abuse of migrant labourers by segregating them in a particular region, preventing their cultural association with natives. This segregation or ghettoisation creates a sense of 'otherness' among the native population leading to discrimination and prejudice for migrant labourers. There are several aspects of cultural segregation that migrant workers have to face through their peripheral settlement or accommodation. Some of them are religious, racial, linguistic, regional etc. In the case of religious segregation, we observe that- even though most migrant labourers belong to the Muslim communities of South Asia and Africa, they have their separate mosques nearby the settlement. They are not supposed to go to the mosques originally situated in the city and made for nationals.

There could also be seen the kind of discrimination in terms of race- for example, more than 25% of the total migrants in the Gulf belong to India (9 million out of 35 million). Though India provides this much number of labourers to the Gulf, white colour jobs are mainly occupied/dominated by a tiny population of westerners. Very few migrants (well educated) coming from south Asia could be seen in their premier public or private institutions (PTI 2021).

Therefore, this could also be interpreted to have given the sense of racial discrimination against migrants in the GCC.

Issues regarding Wages

There is a huge wage disparity among migrant workers in GCC Countries. Lower wages are given to migrant workers, but there is also a huge wage disparity based on nationality and ethnicity. Very low work values are placed on the work done by certain races, placing South Asian migrant workers at the bottom. The works of Arab migrants and Western expatriates are valued much more than those of Asian migrants. However, Emirati nationals are still placed at the top of the ladder, earning much higher wages for less work. There could be an economic prospect behind the idea of lower wages or wage disparity. But, one of the central and foundational ideas could also be their perception and prejudice towards racial superiority, which creates a sense of otherness for South Asian migrant workers.

The report published in the article "Migrant Labour in the Arabian Gulf: A Case Study of Dubai, UAE", initially written in the context of the UAE, mentions that the average monthly income of an Emirati national is \$4901, whereas \$1582 for western /white migrant worker and only \$680 for South Asian and African migrants (Hamza 2015). Here, colour and poverty are indirectly linked with so-called inferior culture or the cultures of migrants belonging to South Asia and Africa. The above data clearly emphasises that some racial discrimination leads to the cultural gap between migrants and nationals.

The cultural aspect of the Kafala System

GCC Countries have designed this system in such a way that this system requires all labour migrants to operate through contracts which usually lasts for 2-3 years at a time. This controversial system allows the Gulf governments to avoid recognising migrant workers as residents, meaning that they are not obliged to uphold their rights and benefits in the way that they do for nationals. There is no provision for either citizenship or permanent residency in the Gulf (except in Kuwait, where one can get it by living there for more than 20 years) (Ali 2010).

That is how, by denying residency and citizenship, they always keep their cultural identities separated from migrant workers. They neither believe in assimilation nor integration but in separation instead. This fear and avoidance of assimilation through well-manipulated separation also gives a sense of otherness, leading to open discrimination against migrant workers.

In his book "City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain", Andrew Gardner mentions that the Kafala System is an outgrowth of a cultural practice used to organise labour on pearling dhow-boats. So the system is viewed as a cultural legacy in the Gulf.

This system emerged as it is practised today extensively in the 21st century and is partially coded in the law (Gardner 2010). The idea behind depriving migrants of permanent residency and citizenship with the help of the Kafala System is to deny them the country's legal framework so that they could be kept away from the legal, political, and internal affairs of the nations. Because migrants do not have voices in the legal system, their voices will remain unheard or unrepresented in policies, laws, and various govt machinery; that is what governments want.

So, the deprivation of rights and benefits for migrant people in the Gulf countries creates a visible dichotomy in the society, which indirectly allows the nationals to develop a sense of superiority or superior mentality. This superior mentality can be understood as a reason for the social marginalisation of migrant workers (Hamza 2015).

Superficially, discrimination against migrant labourers in the Gulf is less visible on paper. But, in reality, it is thoroughly ingrained in its culture and societies. Cities situated in the Gulf have become known for the luxury they provide to the people, but the treatment of the migrant labourers in the GCC is the dark side of these luxurious cities, though the same migrant workers ultimately develop /developed the Gulf cities. The lavish lifestyle and the world-class cities of the Gulf are developed at the expense of the rights and liberties of migrant labourers. Why are the issues of cultural assimilation only with migrant labourers (poor people)? Why not with economically sound foreigners residing in the core of the cities? There is a clear-cut separation or discrimination between rich and poor, and unfortunately, the poor are migrant labourers. Here, economic status is very much interlinked with cultural issues, and financial status has become the parameter for a person whether they will be treated well or not. So, along with cultural rigidity and superior complexity among nationals, the economic situation of the migrants has become one of the core reasons for the social and cultural issues in the Gulf.

Conclusion

We have now come to realise that having proper management for migrant labourers is vital to pursuing the national needs and interests of any country in the world, particularly in the Gulf region. GCC monarchies, keeping the very factor in mind, cultivated labour import as a prime strategy to grapple with local labour deficits in the post-oil boom era. GCC monarchies have devised the “Gulf Model of Migration, which is primarily based on ‘temporary labour import’ averting family reunification and naturalisation of the labour migrants, limiting their socio-economic rights and advocating sponsorship rights. In order to check the higher concentration of foreign migrant inflow in the region and to evade the fear of losing their Khaleeji identity, these GCC nations have cultivated the Kafala system as their main policy of labour migration. The system makes sure that the migrant stay is temporary and labour migrants are denied their socio-political rights. The Kafala system has been criticised time and again for becoming a tool of migration abuse and exploitation. It is condemned as a part of the modern slave system exercised through a cohesive set of policies intended to segregate and seclude the migrant. It has become a legalised form of structural violence, creating social and cultural differences against migrant labourers. None of the GCC states have ratified the only United Nations (UN) convention that deals explicitly with the rights of migrants namely, the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families Convention, 1990. They have also not ratified some crucial International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. Among the ILO fundamental conventions, the GCC states choose to ratify only four – Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (C29); Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (C105); Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (C138); Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (C182). Such a scenario increases the sense of alienation and vulnerability in the migrants as they do not receive direct protection from the state.

Migrants have become society's most vulnerable people, often facing, exploitation, xenophobia, discrimination, poor living, housing, working conditions, and insufficient access to health services. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of both the sending and destination countries to safeguard the rights of migrants regarding their humane treatment and not to push them into even deeper poverty and exploitation. Inadequate healthcare, poor economic conditions, and overcrowded living conditions make migrants more vulnerable. Therefore, it is necessary to have supportive policy responses with a national and social protection system inclusive of all communities, including migrants. It's the need of an hour for both sending and destination countries to develop a comprehensive labour migration framework which must be ratified by international standards.

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