

COMMENT

The South Asian-Gulf migrant crisis



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The South Asian labour force forms the backbone of the Gulf economies, but has no social security protection or labour rights

In early July, the Kerala High Court issued notice to the Central and State governments on a petition seeking to set up a mechanism to assist NRIs who had lost their jobs abroad and had returned to India, to seek due compensation. The petition was initiated by Lawyers Beyond Borders, an international network of legal experts. It seeks the court's intervention to reclaim unpaid salaries, residual arrears, retirement benefits, and even compensation for relatives of migrant workers, who had died since the outbreak of COVID-19. The exposes the precarious conditions of migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Employers, particularly construction companies, have used the crisis as an opportunity to retrench masses of migrant labourers without paying them wages or allowances.

Living in misery

The South Asia-Gulf migration corridor is among the largest in the world. South Asians account for nearly 15 million in the Gulf. According to the World Bank, in 2019, total remittances to South Asia was about \$140 billion, of which India received \$83.1 billion, Pakistan received \$22.5 billion, Bangladesh received \$18.3 billion and Nepal \$8.1 billion. The South Asian labour force forms the backbone of the Gulf economies, but has had to go knocking on doors for food and other basic necessities. The pandemic, the shutdown of companies, the tightening of borders, and the exploitative nature of the Kafala sponsorship system have all aggravated the miseries of South Asian migrant workers. They have no safety net, social security protection, welfare mechanisms, or labour rights. The events are reminiscent of the plight of migrant labourers who had been evacuated during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, as we found during our field research in Kuwait a while ago. In the initial days of the lockdown, the Kerala government was requested to send regular medicines for lifestyle diseases. Since medicines are expensive in the GCC, migrants often procure them from India and stock up for a few months. However, the suspension of flights caused an acute shortage of medicines, and exposed the frail medical insurance system in the GCC for these workers. Now, thousands have returned home empty-handed from the host countries.

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Indians constitute the largest segment of the South Asian workforce. Gulf migration is predominantly a male-driven phenomenon. A majority of the migrants are single men living in congested labour camps. They share rooms and toilets, to save earnings to send back home. The COVID-19 spike in these labour camps has mainly been due to overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions. However, as the COVID-19 crisis and response unfolded in the Gulf countries, the most neglected segment turned out to be the migrant women domestic workers, whose untold miseries have increased in the present volatile situation. The Indian missions, with their inadequate administrative personnel, could not adequately cater to the needs of the migrants. The situation forced the Indian government to repatriate the NRIs through the Vande Bharat Mission. The Indian government has repatriated over 7.88 lakh NRIs from various destinations. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, etc. have also been repatriating their citizens.

Rehabilitate, reintegrate, and resettle

The countries of origin are now faced with the challenge of rehabilitating, reintegrating, and resettling these migrant workers. To facilitate this, the Indian government has announced 'SWADES' for skill mapping of citizens returning from abroad, but implementation seems uncertain. Kerala, the largest beneficiary of international migration, has announced 'Dream Kerala' to utilise the multifaceted resources of the migrants. Bangladesh has announced a special package for the resettlement of return migrants which includes money on arrival, money to launch self-employment projects, and compensation for the families of those who died abroad from COVID-19. The Overseas Employment Corporation in Pakistan has come out with special programmes to upgrade the skills of returnees.

The past three major crises in the Gulf – the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the global economic crisis, and Nitaqat in Saudi Arabia – had not triggered a massive return migration. However, the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 along with the fluctuation of oil prices has triggered unpredictable levels of reverse migration. In the past, high unemployment among the natives, the economic crisis, demographic imbalance, and the Arab spring triggered the movement for nationalisation of labour in the GCC countries. Now, the movement for nationalisation of labour and the anti-migrant sentiment have peaked. Countries like Oman and Saudi Arabia have provided subsidies to private companies to prevent native lay-offs. However, the nationalisation process is not going to be smooth given the stigma attached to certain jobs and the influence of 'royal sheikh culture'.

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Paradoxically, countries that are sending migrant workers abroad are caught between the promotion of migration, on the one hand, and the protection of migrant rights in increasingly hostile countries receiving migrants, on the other. The need of the hour is a comprehensive migration management system for countries that send workers as well as those that receive them. No South Asian country except Sri Lanka has an adequate migration policy. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to voice the rights of South

Asian migrants and to bring the South Asia-Gulf migration corridor within the ambit of SAARC, the ILO, and UN conventions.

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