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How migrants in the Gulf are fighting discrimination during the pandemic

Indian labourers have been denied pay, food and accommodation. Now, some are demanding their rights

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Over two million Indians from the state of Kerala were working in the Gulf before the pandemic. | Iain Masterton / Alamy Stock Photo, all rights reserved.

Like millions before him, Manoj migrated from the southwestern Indian state of Kerala to the Gulf in search of work in 2019. He found a job at a construction company in Bahrain that described itself as a “regional leader”. The pay, at 240 dinars (£577) a month, was far more than he could expect to find at home.

Last February, as cases of COVID-19 soared in Bahrain, the company stopped paying Manoj and two dozen other employees. When they complained, their employer stopped providing food and accommodation, too.



Manoj and his colleagues refused to leave and continued to demand their unpaid wages. “Once they realised we will not back off, they offered to give us back our passports and pay for our return to Kerala under the condition that we give up our unpaid wages,” he said. They rejected the offer. “They cut off our electricity after that.”

By then, it was the middle of August, when temperatures can reach as high as 40°C in Bahrain. Determined to get what they were owed, the workers continued to occupy their accommodation. Without electricity, they had to spend the hottest parts of the day in air-conditioned shopping malls and rely on a portable stove, provided by a Keralite charity, to cook.

By September, some workers had found new employers and others were repatriated on rescue missions, but despite their efforts they have still not received the thousands of pounds in unpaid salary they are owed.

Stolen wages

Manoj is one of hundreds of migrant workers from Kerala who were left stranded and without months’ worth of pay during the pandemic. In the Gulf alone, over 700 Keralite workers have reported non-payment of wages since the pandemic began, according to the Centre for Indian Migrant Studies. But with millions of migrant workers in the region, the true number is likely much higher.

Wage theft – the denial of wages or benefits rightfully owed to an employee – could devastate Kerala’s economy. Just under a half of Keralite households include labour migrants, while remittances from migrant workers account for a quarter of the state’s gross domestic product.

“This is a community which has provided a lot, not only to Kerala in terms of financial and social capital, but also to the destinations as well, becoming entrenched and quite influential in many sectors in the Gulf,” said Irudaya Rajan, a leading expert on Keralite migration at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram.



Kerala is unique in India when it comes to international migration. From the 19th century onwards, Keralites migrated to all corners of the British Empire, a trend which continued long after India gained independence in 1947. In the 1970s, an oil boom created a surge in demand for labourers in the Gulf, largely filled by Keralites who were drawn there by a lack of employment opportunities at home and the promise of higher wages. By 2018, almost two million Keralites were working in the Gulf, accounting for every one in four Indian migrants.

Initially, most Keralites in the Gulf were employed in the construction sector and other low-skilled jobs in the service sector. But over the years, they have taken up semi and high-skilled occupations, such as fire and safety engineers, nurses, care workers and business administrators.

Contracts abruptly terminated

Since the pandemic began, close to 900,000 Keralites have been repatriated from around the world, the highest number of any Indian state. Almost 95% returned from the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

Many migrant workers in the Gulf were left without the right to remain in their destination country when their employment contracts were terminated at the start of the pandemic. Under the Kafala (or 'sponsorship') system in place across many Gulf countries, migrant workers' citizenship is dependent on an employment contract with a specific employer – and workers are not free to change jobs.

"Kafala is like modern slavery," said Khalid Ibrahim, Executive Director at the Gulf Centre for Human Rights.

"They hold your passport, so you are not allowed to leave the country, and they pay you as much as they want, mostly not proportional to the size of your work. And you have no right to defend anything, your colleagues or yourself, you have no rights, no access to unions," he added.



No recourse to help

Hari had worked for Nasser S. Al Hajri, one of the largest industrial contractors in the Middle East, as a carpenter and painter for thirteen years before his job was terminated without notice in July. He was promised redundancy pay by his manager before the company arranged for his return to India – but he is yet to be paid.

“They will not rehire me after the pandemic because I’m 53 years old. My family is in a financial crisis and I need that money to survive,” he said.

As many as 600 workers are allegedly owed wages and redundancy pay from the Saudi construction firm, according to Lawyers Beyond Borders, who have launched legal action on behalf of former employees. Among them, half are from Kerala.

Nasser S. Al Hajri did not respond to a request for comment by openDemocracy.

For workers like Hari, recovering stolen wages is almost impossible. Before he was returned to India, Hari and his colleagues were pushed to sign several legal documents by his employer, which they believe waived their rights.

“This makes the possibility of retrieving the money through labour offices in Saudi Arabia minimal. Filing these legal cases in India is not an adequate solution either,” said Lawyers Beyond Borders solicitor Subhash Chandran.

Most workers are not aware of how to report their employers for withholding wages, leading to cases being registered late and delayed investigations. And there are complicated issues of legal jurisdiction. Those who have returned to Kerala cannot file legal cases against their employers without a power of attorney in their destination country.

“The existing justice mechanism has largely failed migrant workers in terms of an expedited and just resolution of wage-theft claims even before the pandemic,” said William Gois, Regional Coordinator of Migrant Forum in Asia.



“This is why we launched the Justice for Wage Theft campaign calling for an urgent justice mechanism, specifically to establish an international claims commission, the compensation fund, and the reform of national justice systems,” he added.

For migrant workers like Thomas, who the Indian government rescued after he was left stranded in the Gulf after a construction firm stopped paying his wages, there is little prospect of justice. Thomas spent his life savings on migrating to the region for work.

“I dreamt of a better life for my family, especially my children,” he said. “I need the money that I’m owed. How do I look after them right now?”

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