

Blue Collar Immigrant Blues

“Many Indian ‘guest workers’ in the gulf exist in near-slavery like conditions. Yet, having sunk their lifetime savings into gaining work visas from foreign employment agents in India, the option of returning home is unthinkable.”

[BY SREERAM CHAULIA]

World migration flows have been on a constant upward march over the past half century, making the issue one of the great global concerns of our time. The United Nations estimates that, as of 2005, there were more than 190 million migrants on the planet, i.e. two-and-half times greater than the stock of 75 million migrants in the year 1960. A host of socio-economic causes explain the steadily expanding phenomenon from the demand side (countries seeking immigrants) and the supply side (countries sending immigrants). By its very nature, immigration is an act of exchange between exporting and importing countries. As long as the world is structured in a framework of nation-states, immigration will necessarily involve inter-state relations. The free will of individuals



wishing to emigrate or of employers desiring to hire migrants is bounded by inter-state political arrangements and agreements that regulate the flows of manpower.

The understanding of migration as an inter-state affair is traditionally projected through the prism of bilateralism. India, which has around 25 million ‘non-residents’ (NRIs, who hold Indian citizenship) and ‘persons of Indian origin’ (PIOs, who are no longer Indian citizens), maintains friendly relations on a one-to-one basis with countries that host them. Numbers count in New Delhi’s prioritisation of attention towards particular countries that host large chunks of NRIs and PIOs. With 2.1 million NRIs and PIOs, the United States is the single most important host country from Delhi’s perspective. Malaysia (1.6 million), the United Kingdom (1.2 million) and South

Africa (1 million) are other high value countries due to their sizeable communities with an Indian connection. India’s foreign relations with each of these countries may have multiple foci from trade to defence, but the NRI dimension always has a bearing.

The patterns of Indian overseas migration throw up one major regional cluster in the Persian Gulf. Taken individually as host states, Middle Eastern countries may not match the numbers of the US, but as a group, they receive a massive influx of Indians in search of better opportunities. Saudi Arabia (1.5 million), United Arab Emirates (95 lakh), Oman (3.1 lakh), Kuwait (2.95 lakh), Bahrain (1.3 lakh) and Qatar (1.31 lakh) are located in close geographical proximity with big contingents of NRIs.

Two special attributes stand out for Indian

migrants in the gulf. Firstly, since migration in these countries is centred on the concept of fixed-period contract work, all immigrants hailing from India are NRIs, i.e. citizens of India on temporary permits. The gulf does not have many PIOs because naturalised citizenship for migrants is barred. Secondly, over 70 percent of NRIs in the gulf are blue collar or low/semi-skilled labourers. Compared to high-flying NRIs in North America and Europe, gulf NRIs are primarily working class people with bare basic educational qualifications. Even the PIOs in Malaysia, South Africa, and the Caribbean are better placed than gulf NRIs in class terms, as the former are now third or fourth generation offspring of indentured labourers that were brought to toil in colonial plantations in the 19th century. Exploitation, abuse and ill-treatment may be part of the bloodstream of the PIOs who owe their current situations to British imperial economics, but they presently enjoy citizenship and even privileged class status in some of their respective countries. Over time, their collars have gone from blue to white and gold. On the other hand, the bulk of gulf NRIs are hard-pressed recent arrivals. As the less shiny wing of the global Indian Diaspora with diminished rights, they live as second class citizens faring worse than when they were back home in India.

While famous figures like Indra Nooyi, Lakshmi Mittal and Sabeer Bhatia personify the fairytale image of the rich and happening NRI/PIO, they have proletarian cousins in the gulf region who live abjectly like drudges. The professions in which a vast majority of gulf NRIs struggle read like the A to Z of menial work: Saudi Arabia (cleaners, plumbers, bakers, butchers and domestic helpers), UAE (high rise construction hands), Oman (technicians in construction), Kuwait (domestic helpers), Bahrain (construction hands) and Qatar (carpenters, motor mechanics and domestic helpers). The ordeals they face read like a dictionary of abuse: long work hours, sexual violence, low wages, lack of legal protection, hazardous environments, insults and routine harassment.

Many Indian 'guest workers' in the gulf exist in near-slavery like conditions. Yet, having sunk their lifetime savings into gaining work visas from foreign employment agents in India, the option of returning home is unthinkable. Occasionally, when the pressure of unscrupulous employers in the gulf reaches unbearable limits, blue collar NRIs erupt. In

February of this year, thousands of immigrant construction labourers in Bahrain went on a series of strikes to demand a salary raise from the meagre 57 dinars (6,100 Indian rupees) a month being paid for extremely taxing work.

In the old bilateral fashion outlined above, the Indian government tried to intervene on behalf of its citizens and announced that it would fix a minimum wage of 100 dinars for all future contract workers going to Bahrain. New Delhi was hoping that this stipulation will be accepted, since a similar pay hike for domestic helpers was conceded by Bahrain in October 2007. However, the stakes were higher this time, with Bahraini construction companies fearful that giving an inch would yield an acre. The host government rejected India's efforts to secure the rights of blue collar NRIs by arguing that it cannot impose restrictions on its private sector.

In October 2007, thousands of immigrant labourers in Dubai, including NRIs, downed tools over poor wages and working conditions. The authorities in UAE refused to pay heed and punished some of them for "barbaric behaviour" with jail sentences and deportation. Earlier in May 2006, dozens of Indian construction workers were deported from the UAE on allegations of being "ring leaders" of a nationwide stir for better wages and food allowances. In these cases too, the Indian government could not change the situation in favour of repressed NRIs despite taking up the matter through diplomatic channels.

Since its inauguration in 2004, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has acted in great earnestness to support the cause of blue collar NRIs in the gulf countries. Its latest initiative is the opening of three Overseas Indian Centres (OICs), one of which will be in Dubai, "to ensure that Indians staying abroad were not exploited and to make them aware about their rights and obligations." These centres extend the logic of the Overseas Workers Resource Centre (OWRC), which was set up earlier as an informational aid to those in India wanting to go abroad for employment. India realises the enormous significance of remittances from NRIs and PIOs (the highest in the world at \$ 24.6 billion in 2006) and is putting in place institutional mechanisms to preserve the inflow of funds.

However, India's difficulties in winning concessions for tormented NRIs in Bahrain and the UAE suggest that counselling and grievance redress are not panaceas. For

blue collar NRIs to have justice, a bolder multilateral diplomatic effort has to be devised by New Delhi in contrast to its current bilateral approach with individual host countries. This must begin by brainstorming with all the principal migrant-supplying countries in the gulf region, i.e. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Each of them has a profile of low-skilled workers in the gulf similar to India's. Together, the manpower of these seven countries accounts for the mass of the blue collar workforce in the gulf. Yet, since each migrant-exporting country deals bilaterally with each host country, it negotiates and bargains only on behalf of its own overseas citizens. Islamabad, Dhaka, Colombo, Jakarta, Hanoi and Manila have bureaus or desks that are counterparts to the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, but they do not act in unison the way a suppliers cartel does in business.

In the example cited above from Bahrain, contractors threatened deportation of the striking migrant workers due to the smugness that they could find replacements from Vietnam. The obstinacy with which employers and governments in the gulf have defused immigrant worker protests arises from the confidence that they can find substitutes from other developing countries. What if all the cheap labour supplying countries coordinated a unified position on minimum wages and decent treatment of their nationals? The bargaining process would look very different since gulf countries are dependent on blue collar immigration to sustain their economic miracles. If they face a virtual unionisation of all migrant-sending countries, basic demands like minimum wages cannot be denied. If India were to launch inter-governmental cooperation with the six other migrant-supplying states, greedy companies in the gulf would have no replacement workers to toy with.

Blue collar NRIs in the gulf rub shoulders and share quarters with expatriate workers of other Asian countries. Their fates are inseparable. A piecemeal bilateral response to the travails of NRIs will not yield desired redemption because the employment profile of gulf companies is multinational. Global problems like migration need global solutions. [@](#)

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