

Health crisis, social crisis: No Good Options for Migrant Workers in Gulf COVID-19 Lockdown

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Once again, many South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf are in extremely precarious circumstances brought on by global economic convulsions. Over the past few weeks, I spoke with Indian laborers working in the Gulf via phone and messaging apps to learn how the global coronavirus pandemic is impacting their lives. With oil projects stopped, due to decreased demand and the earlier price wars between Saudi Arabia and Russia, South Asian migrant laborers increasingly fear they will not be paid for their work and that their companies will no longer pay for their housing in camps.

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These concerns are far from exaggerated, particularly given the experiences of large numbers of workers who were abandoned following the 2008 recession. The circumstances now are more dire. With enforced isolation to contain the spread of the virus, and the restrictions on movement between camps for laborers, it is unclear how workers who are abandoned under the present quarantine restrictions will meet their daily needs. Workers feel uncertain of the future, concerned for their families' health and worried about how they and their families will survive if they lose their jobs.

In 2009, I sat with a group of South Asian migrant laborers who were living in an abandoned camp in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE).[1] As I listened to these men recount their experiences, an Indian Muslim man, Aijaz, turned to me and asked in Hindi, "We do not have a degree, none of us can read. Why do they not give us the money they owe us? ... Why does no one help us?" Aijaz and the other residents of the abandoned camp were just a few of the South Asians I met while doing research in 2009 and 2010 in the UAE. At that time, the Gulf was still reeling from the impact of the 2008 Great Recession and many oil projects were stalled [1]. Companies went out of business and owners of companies fled the UAE fearing debtors' prison.

Abandoned workers often told me they were never paid for the work they performed prior to their companies closing. Not only were they unpaid, men at these camps had no access to water, no food and no electricity. Abandoned workers were dependent on employed workers living in neighboring camps, who shared their food and water. A volunteer group of middle and upper-class South Asians also helped by bringing food for iftar during Ramadan and supplying toiletries. Eventually, these volunteers held a fundraiser and, with the proceeds, bought plane tickets home for Aijaz and his

fellow campmates.

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Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Asian migrant workers are captive to the decisions of governments and companies, have little agency to make their own choices and no good options. Workers fear that, if they stay in the Gulf, they risk abandonment by their employers and coronavirus infection from cramped living conditions. If they return to India under lockdown, they fear starvation, mounting debts, joblessness, the possible loss of any small landholdings and anti-Muslim sentiment.

COVID-19 and Lockdown in the Gulf

South Asian migrant laborers, even before the coronavirus pandemic, live in crowded camps, largely isolated from the rest of the residents of the Gulf [2]. Today, these crowded and remote locations mean that workers are also under increased threat of contracting COVID-19. Like the poor in much of the world, migrant laborers are contracting the disease and dying of it at higher rates than the rest of the population.

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Infection in the Gulf is growing rapidly. On April 14, 2020, the Gulf States collectively reported 16,613 cases of COVID-19. By April 29, the Gulf States have 50,572 cases. Qatar has the highest rate of infection, at 4,361 cases per 1 million [3]. The majority of those infected are migrant workers living in a labor camp outside of Doha. On April 11, Bahrain said that 45 of its 47 newly diagnosed people were foreign workers and, by April 23, hundreds of migrant workers were quarantined after an unknown number contracted the disease. The Saudi Press Agency reported on April 5 that 53 percent of cases in Saudi Arabia were migrants and the health ministry reported on April 16 that foreign workers comprised 80 percent of new COVID-19 cases in the country.

While reports are fragmentary, throughout the Gulf it is believed that foreign workers account for the majority of COVID-19 infections and deaths. Access to medical resources for workers, however, seems to be largely dependent upon employer policies. According to the South Asian migrant workers I have spoken to, they are also uncomfortable seeking medical care. In part, this stems from their limited familiarity with medical resources in the Gulf. In addition, migrants are required to undergo medical testing before moving to the Gulf, which many find to be unpleasant, unfamiliar and intrusive. Migrants are deterred from seeking care because of this limited and negative experience with healthcare in conjunction with the fact that many workers know of colleagues who were sent home—and lost jobs—because of illness.

Despite these concerns, when a health clinic in Abu Dhabi offered testing for COVID-19 [4], it drew hundreds of people, most of them low-wage workers. In addition, employers have told me that they have taken employees who are experiencing severe symptoms to local hospitals. Not all workers have equal access to health care. Recently, a group of Indian laborers working in Ajman and who are sick with COVID-19 tweeted to the chief minister of Telangana state in India and the *Times of India* that they were being kept in quarantine and not provided medication [5].

Indian laborers report that their daily lives are now restricted to their rooms and, if they are lucky, their job sites. Based on my conversations, it appears that oil and construction projects are mostly stopped, while some factories remain open. When I spoke with Ahmed, a manual laborer from Bihar,

India, who works in Abu Dhabi, he described his living situation: He is confined to a small, dorm-like room with seven other Indian men. All work at his job site is stopped, but Ahmed is hopeful that he will receive his next paycheck. Another Indian laborer, Syed, who works in Sharjah, explained that work at his factory continues, but his temperature is taken at the beginning of every shift. Other than work at the factory, Syed is also confined to his room. He was unsure what would happen to him if he became feverish. I reached out to managers at a couple of companies and they reported that they are using empty rooms at their laborers' dorms for quarantining those with symptoms. In contrast, other companies are eager for workers to leave the Gulf. In Qatar's industrial area—an area with high rates of COVID-19 infections—Amnesty International reports that Nepalese workers living there are being rounded up by the police, sent to detention centers and then deported to Nepal.

Obstacles to Returning Home Multiply

Indian migrant workers are not only under threat of starvation or disease, they are also unwanted by both the Gulf and India. On March 19, 2020, the UAE banned entry of valid resident visa holders to the country and began a suspension of both work visas and visas upon arrival. By March 23, the UAE's two largest air carriers, Etihad and Emirates, stopped all passenger flights, effectively closing the country's borders. Other Gulf States implemented similar measures: Bahrain closed its borders to all but citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council states on March 18,[2] Kuwait on March 13, Qatar on March 18 and Saudi Arabia on March 15.

Then, on March 25, India initiated a national lockdown and the closure of its borders. In the time between the announcement and the closing of borders, Indians from all over the world returned to the country. As Indians returned, the government stated that all nationals who passed through the Gulf would be required to enter a 14-day quarantine—despite the fact that other countries such as the United States had higher rates of COVID-19 infection than the Gulf States. This action disproportionately impacted poor Indians, who have limited control over their flight itineraries and who are more likely to work in the Gulf than in North America or Europe.

Now, with borders closed, the Indian government refuses to repatriate its citizens who are working in the Gulf. This move has been highly contested, both in India and the Gulf. In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the Indian state of Kerala argued for the repatriation of laborers because “preventive measures and quarantine methods implemented in Dubai are neither effective nor adequate.”[3] The UAE also wants India to repatriate workers and is offering to pay for both flights and COVID-19 tests for returning Indian workers—while threatening that it will discontinue hiring Indians in the future if their government does not act quickly. In response, on April 11, the Indian ambassador indicated that India could not accept repatriated workers until the lockdown in India was lifted, which is currently scheduled to occur on May 3.

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During our conversations, migrants voiced concerns that they may catch the coronavirus, be abandoned by their employers, or both. Despite these worries, however, almost every Indian worker with whom I spoke said that they would prefer to continue working in the Gulf, as long as they continue to be paid. The most pressing concern for many is paying for their families' daily necessities, including food. If they return to India, they ask, how will they earn money to feed their families? This concern is echoed by the poor in South Asia as lockdowns instituted by their governments hinders their ability to work and, therefore, eat. In just the past few days, the unemployed across South Asia have held protests—from factory and construction workers in

Pakistan to garment workers in Bangladesh to internal migrants living in India's biggest cities.[4] Protesters say that they will starve if their governments do not step in to feed them or subsidize their lost pay during the coronavirus lockdowns.

The Benefits—and Costs—of Migration to the Gulf

Annually, approximately 1 million Indian men, mostly from rural areas, travel to the oil-producing countries of the Arabian Peninsula to work as laborers. The majority of Indians in the Gulf work in unskilled or semi-skilled positions, two of the categories used by the Indian government to classify migrant workers. Unskilled workers refer to manual laborers who, in my research, mostly work in construction. Semi-skilled workers usually have some technical training or experience and their positions include pipe fitters, steel binders, electricians, plumbers, bar benders, pressmen, masons, welders and drivers.

Transnational migration is seen by many poor families as a means of improving their quality of life. While historically many migrants were from southern Indian states, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, today the majority come from northern states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, that are the most reliant on agriculture and have higher unemployment and underemployment rates.[5] In these states the majority of farms are smaller than an acre in size and their owners most often work as what the Indian government labels casual laborers, earning on average between \$2 and \$3 per day.[6] It is often hard for casual workers to find stable employment at home. In contrast, migrants tell me that working in the Gulf pays six to ten times more than a similar job in India. Therefore, it is tempting to take on the debt needed to buy tickets and pay a whole host of fees to subcontractors, agents and government agencies for visas and jobs.

This debt, frequently with very high interest rates, is often more than what an entire family earns annually. In the hundreds of interviews I have conducted with Indian migrants since 2008, I find that the overwhelming majority borrow between approximately \$915 and \$1,570 (Rs. 70,000 and Rs. 120,000) in order to acquire a job in the Gulf. The most fortunate migrants are able to repay this amount after two to four years of work, although it is not uncommon to meet men who have worked in the Gulf for over a decade and still are paying their debt.

Raj says he fears he will lose his job in the UAE and consequently be unable to pay his debts. Foreseeing a grim future, he believes he will soon be "jobless and landless."

Returning home to India before they are able to pay their debts means that migrants are unable to support their families. Additionally, this debt puts their families' few assets, such as their small farms, at risk of being seized by money lenders. For example, Raj, who worked in Sharjah, UAE, but was on his biannual leave to his village in southern India when travel restrictions were put in place, told me that he is "desperate" to return to his job in Sharjah because there is "no money and no food" in his village. He fears he will lose his job in the UAE and consequently be unable to pay his debts. Foreseeing a grim future, Raj believes he will soon be "jobless and landless."

Rising Anti-Muslim Sentiment in India Also Deters Returns

Indian migrants explain that they have little choice whether to remain in the Gulf or return to India, but that neither option is "good." When I ask about what will happen next, some reply using an Arabic phrase, *tawakkaltu ala-Allah*, indicating that they "trust in God." Others respond by asking me simply in Hindi, *kya karo?* or "what [am I] to do?" Both responses highlight the extremely limited

agency migrant laborers have at this time to decide their own futures. At the mercy of governmental and company decisions, they are worried what happens next. If they are forced to stay in the Gulf, they risk their health and their jobs, while returning to India carries its own risks.

Many migrants express concern that the religious discrimination they, as Muslims, regularly experience in India will be worse in the current moment. A disproportionately large number of Indian migrants to the Gulf are Muslims. In India, Muslims face a range of social and economic inequalities. Faiz, an Indian Muslim working in Abu Dhabi, explained how religious discrimination contributed to his decision to migrate. "Hindus get jobs easier [in India]. We [Indians] have a secular government, but in fact mostly non-Muslims are favored.... When there is a Muslim name [on a job application or CV], they [the employers] have a different attitude, and this almost always applies to government, education and business." According to a 2006 report by the Indian government, Indian Muslims live in areas with poor infrastructure and they experience regular discrimination in the public sphere.[7] Additional disadvantages faced by Muslims in India include lower literacy rates, unequal access to educational and governmental institutions and biased representation in the media. These disadvantages often converge with regional economic disparities to heighten the inequalities that Muslims face.

There are frequent reports of violence against Muslims in India, which closely correlate with Hindu nationalist policies that politically exclude Muslims. One recent example is the Citizenship Amendment Act, passed in 2019, which fast tracks citizenship for South Asians of all religions who are entering India except Muslims. Following the passage of this act, protests over the exclusion of Muslims erupted throughout India. In late February 2020, protests in the capital of New Delhi led to violent clashes between Hindus (including members of the police force) and Muslims. The riots left at least 53 dead, two-thirds of whom were Muslims.[8] During these riots, a group shouting "India for Hindus" and other Hindu nationalist slogans, paraded around a burning mosque and set a Hindu god's flag on top of the mosque's minaret.[9]

Over the past few weeks, social media accounts in India have been circulating false accusations that Indian Muslims are spreading COVID-19.

Now coronavirus is further fanning anti-Muslim violence in India. Over the past few weeks, social media accounts in India have been circulating false accusations that Indian Muslims are spreading COVID-19, and these rumors are then mobilized to incite violence against Muslims. On April 7, for example, Hindus attacked a group of Muslim men in Jharkhand and killed one person after rumors spread that Muslims were "spitting" in order to purposefully infect Hindus with coronavirus.[10]

Transnational Workers Need International Safeguards

Discrimination, violence and lack of resources in India mean that the repatriation of migrant workers does not address the human rights crises that are being exacerbated by the global pandemic. The same social and economic inequalities that influenced migrants' choices to travel to the Gulf for work will lead to higher rates of starvation during India's shutdown and higher mortality rates due to COVID-19.

Similarly, it is also untenable for unemployed migrants to remain in the Gulf without additional safeguards and oversight. The experiences of abandoned workers following the global recession of 2008, workers' currently overcrowded living conditions and limited resources mean that migrants in the Gulf are living in extremely life-threatening circumstances.

While many of these issues may seem to be particular to the Gulf, the experiences of migrant

workers around the world demonstrate global connections and the challenges of addressing crises through national frameworks. The next steps taken by governments and international organizations must consider responses to the coronavirus on a scale that moves beyond national borders in order to develop safeguards to protect the lives and livelihoods of those that are most vulnerable to the virus and the vicissitudes of capitalism.

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Endnotes

[1] With the exception of public officials, all names are pseudonyms.

[2] GCC states are Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi, UAE, Qatar and Oman.

[3] As is common in India when discussing the Gulf, Dubai is used to refer to all of the Gulf states.

[4] Shazia Hasan, "Workers Protest for Payment of Wages, Dues in Karachi," Dawn, April 19, 2020; "'Starving' Bangladesh Garment Workers Protest for Pay during COVID-19 Lockdown," Arab News, April 13, 2020; Joe Wallen, "Protests Break out in India as Migrant Workers Stranded and Starving far from Home," The Telegraph, April 17, 2020.

[5] Periodic Labour Force Survey, Annual Report, June 2017-June 2018 (New Delhi: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2019); Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Annual Report 2012-13. (New Delhi: Government of India, 2013).

[6] National Sample Survey Office (NSS), "Employment and Unemployment Situation in India, NSS Report No. 554" (New Delhi: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2014).

[7] Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India, (Government of India, November 29, 2006).

[8] PTI, "It's Official," TheWire.in, March 8, 2020; Jeffrey Gettleman, Sameer Yasir, Suhasini Raj and Hari Kumar, "How Delhi's Police Turned Against Muslims," The New York Times, March 12, 2020.

[9] Naomi Barton, "Delhi Riots," TheWire.in, February 25, 2020.

[10] Arunabh Saikia, "The Other Virus," Scroll.in, April 8, 2020.

P.S.

• Andrea Wright. "No Good Options for Migrant Workers in Gulf COVID-19 Lockdown," Middle East Report Online, April 30, 2020:
<https://merip.org/2020/04/no-good-options-for-migrant-workers-in-gulf-covid-19-lockdown/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://merip.org/2009/11/the-precarious-existence-of-dubais-indian-middle-class/>

[2] <https://merip.org/2007/06/dubai-in-a-jagged-world/>

[3] <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>?

[4] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-emirates-testing/coronavirus-tests-at-abu-dhabi-hospital-draw-hundreds-to-queue-in-sun-idUSKCN2232B6>

[5] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/indian-hospital-workers-in-dubai-camp-test-positive-send-sos-hom/articleshow/75344459.cms>