

Indian migrant workers in Oman speak to the WSWS

“Unemployment and rising living costs forced us to seek jobs in the Gulf”

Parwini Zora
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The following interviews with Indian workers employed in Oman were made by WSWS correspondent Parwini Zora during a brief visit to the country last September.

Thirty-five million people live in the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.) Of these, 13 million or 37 percent are foreign-born workers and their families.

The majority of these so-called expatriates have come to the Gulf from desperately poor neighbouring regions of Asia and Africa. While the ex-pats reportedly send some \$30 billion home annually and their earnings represent an important source of foreign exchange for a number of Asian and African governments, more than half of them earn a monthly wage of less than US\$400.

Being non-citizens in countries with at best a thin democratic veneer on a despotic political structure, the expatriates have little legal recourse to protest bad, even brutal working conditions, and abuse. In the UAE and Oman, trade union activity is effectively banned, and in the other Gulf Cooperation states, the rights of unions are very limited.

Women domestic workers are especially vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Without rights in a foreign land and generally with no or poor Arab language skills, maids are often forced to work 16 hours a day or more and without even one day off per week.

Another source of abuse is the indenture-style relations that foreign-workers often enter into with labour-recruitment companies. Last February, Arumugam Venkatesan, 25, sole breadwinner of his family of six, was found hanging in his lodgings in Dubai. Venkatesan committed suicide after being unable to keep up with the payments for a high-interest loan he had incurred to pay the fee charged by the company that brought him to Dubai.

Nonetheless, worker protests do occur, particularly over such as issues as the non-payment of wages. Hundreds of construction workers in Dubai, UAE, walked off the job last month to demand that their wages, which were four months in

arrears, be paid.

In Oman, Indian-born workers make up half of the country's 1 million overseas workers. The majority work long hours for low wages, with no insurance coverage or legal protection. Most of the Indian workers in Oman have migrated from the south Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka or come from Maharashtra and the Punjab. Many are employed in construction.

Mani, from Trivandrum, Kerala, has been employed as a cleaner for the last nine months in Oman. When asked what made him seek a job abroad, he said, “I ran a small food store in India which went into insolvency and left me with losses and debt. Then I wasn't successful in finding another job. My wife is employed as a teacher back in India. She earns barely above 5,000 rupees (US\$112) a month. Having two small girls we could not afford to live on her salary alone. So I decided to look for a job in the Gulf.”

Workers from overseas are often recruited by specialised agencies or “sponsors” directly involved with the local employers. Others find work through friends or relatives already employed in the Gulf States. Agencies frequently take commissions from the immigrant workers that amount to considerable sums, depending on the nature of the job. Though, under the law, transportation, visas, and other moving expenses are supposed to be shared by the employee and the employer, the latter rarely pays his share.

When asked about the visa procedure, Mani said, “I had to pay 800 Omani Riyals (US\$2,078) to my sponsor to get my papers and visa done. And after two years, I have to pay another 110 Riyals (US\$286) to renew my visa. But I've heard that this amount varies from sponsor to sponsor. It all depends on the connections the sponsors have with the Omani government. There are instances where some people, who were unable to make that payment initially, pay nearly half of their monthly salary to their sponsors directly as a bond.”

Salaries for overseas workers are known to be far less than for Omani nationals, though still from two to five times higher

than for the equivalent job in India. Asked about the working conditions Mani added, “I earn 70 Riyals (US\$182) a month. I don’t have to pay for accommodation and transport since I have got a small room where I work. So apart from spending for my meals, I manage to save much of my salary to send to my family. I hope I can keep my job for a few years, that way I might save enough money to build a decent house for my family.

“I work 8 to 12 hours daily. As well as cleaning, I attend to many other small jobs that should be done at the firm for which I work. But then thinking of those who have to work the same amount of hours in the hot sun of 40-50 C° on construction sites for just 45-65 Riyals (US\$116-\$170), I consider myself having a bit more luck.’

Commenting on life back in India, Mani said in anger, “Life in Kerala is very hard and expensive. Due to tourism, things are more expensive in urban areas. So, once you are unemployed, there is simply no way of surviving. The bulk of trade unions hardly do anything if someone loses his job. Neither do the unemployed get any assistance from the state or central government. [Under the recently passed National Rural Employment Guarantee law] the Congress [government] promises to give employment for 100 days for one individual in each family. The state government back in Kerala has a keen interest in promoting this bill. The whole thing is a farce. These are empty promises from local politicians with little effect.

“The Left Front and the Congress try to fool the people by saying that the job bill could dramatically improve the life of the poor. If I cannot survive with Rupees (Rs.) 5000 a month with just two kids, how could Rs.5000 for 100 days work a year help any family in any considerable way?”

Lakshman, from south India, has worked in Oman as an office clerk for the last six years, earning 110 Riyals a month (US\$286). After finishing secondary school, he tried his hand in small business but could not earn a living. A distant relative then helped him obtain a visa to get into Oman. This cost him 350 Riyals (US\$909).

When asked why he choose to go abroad, Lakshman said, “I’m coming from a village where hardly any infrastructure exists, and nowhere could you go to get a job from which you could live. Maybe you are aware that Andhra Pradesh has the highest rate of farmer suicides in India. Most of the people are indebted and facing poverty. I have my parents, three brothers and three sisters to help financially. I am not married yet, but I intend to build a house and lead a civilised life, too. For all that I need money. Especially, I need to raise the money for the dowry of my three sisters. We should at least have three Lakh Rupees (US\$6,000)for each sister to get them married decently. [Dowries are illegal in India, but the practice remains widespread. (Parwini Zora)]

“Here I can save much of the money I earn. I also could afford to keep in contact with my family every week via phone. But then there are people who work here in Oman who live in

barrack type lodgings for half as much I earn. There are frequent instances that they don’t get paid in time, sometimes over months. In this country, trade unions do not exist, so we can only complain to the Indian embassy with the hope they would do something. But then, many of the workers here do not know even what they could do when they are deceived by their employers. Some are afraid and others vulnerable due to being illiterate’.

When asked about his opinion of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill (NREG), recently passed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government, which is sustained in office by the Left Front, Lakshman said, “This whole thing is ridiculous. I haven’t been able to follow the exact details of this bill, but if it only promises just above Rs.5000 a year for a family, this is incredibly insufficient. You could hardly do anything with that money. Simply nothing.”

Abul, from West Bengal, has also been employed in Oman for the past six years. Officially, he is a caretaker, but he also attends to various other chores at work. His daily working hours range from 8 to 14 hours, for which he earns a monthly salary of 60 Riyals (US \$156).

Abul said, “Unbearable financial strains forced me to look for work overseas because I found myself left on my own in Calcutta. If you are unemployed, you don’t have anyone you can go to to ask for help. The state and central government have left us on our own. I am not yet married but have to take care of my parents and family. They all depend on me. So, I am happy that here in Oman I can earn a regular monthly income. I even somehow make a monthly contribution to a mosque back in India because I am religious.”

About the NREG he said, “The CPI (M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)], which governs West Bengal, is indifferent to the plight of the poor. What can Rs.5000 provide for a family a year? Let me tell you, even if someone falls sick, we could only get proper medication in a private hospital, and that could cost you several thousands even for a minor ailment. So what we do is stay in large queues in the public hospitals, often with inadequate facilities, hoping that the sick will get better. If you are an ordinary man in India, life is hard. We are forced to compromise with our basic needs and struggle to survive from one day to the next.”



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