



# Structural Exploitation of Migrant Labourers in Gulf countries: A Case Study of Migrants from Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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## Abstract

Migrant workers provide exceptional services and support in this globalized world. They deliver a medley of menial and low skilled services in the private and public sectors. According to the ministry of external affairs 2020, 13.6 million Indians were staying abroad, and 8.5 million reside only in Gulf countries. Every year, many people migrate to pursue better opportunities; travel for holidays, a tour, business, education, pilgrims visit, etc. However, many migrants also go abroad in search of better pay employment. They go hoping with a psychological predetermined notion that after securing a livelihood in host lands, they would be able to support their families left behind at source and could invest their savings after returning to their homeland. Typically, in the informal service sector, it has been found that labourers get exploited in terms of denial of health care facilities, absence of human rights and infrastructural facilities and also face physical violence while staying abroad by their employers. This article elaborated on structural exploitation and violence faced by informal sector migrants in Gulf countries and endeavours that labourers get exploited abroad. Their hope of a foreign land as an idealized place for earning a better livelihood gets devastated when they are in the real world. Finally, this article finds that there is an existence of structural psycho-economic exploitation against migrants by employers (Kafeel).

## Keywords

Laborer, migrants, structural exploitation, plight of migrants, host and home land

## 1. Introduction

A migrant is psychologically trapped at the destination and is helpless to complete the tenure (Ibáñez & Moya, 2010) and continue being exploited because one has taken financial help at the source of origin from relatives, friends and money lenders in the form of pawned jewellery and leases on an agricultural field (Gulati, 1987). Sometimes even they sell the immovable valuable property to migrate to one of the developed countries (Massey, 1987) where employment and better pay are available as informed by a travel agent (Drucker, 2001). And after arriving in the host land without earning at least invested amount for migration, one can't think to return home (Lindley, 2009). Keeping one has to return the taken grants in mind, they continue to tolerate structural violence and exploitation until they earn the invested money (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence exists in a society in its constructed naturalized 'structured way' against poor class by upper classes/capitalists (Galtung, 1969; Zwolinski, 2007). The same can be termed concerning laborer migrants from under developed/developing regions to a developed region of the world (Klugman, 2009). In other words, when a migrant laborer migrates in search of a better economic opportunities specially in an unorganized service sector, they face challenges and exploitation by

state/administration/employer which exist in a very structured way (Zwolinski, 2012). Against it the exploited stand at that time helpless and bears the exploitation (Skrivankova, 2010), later on; it becomes so natural that one thinks that it is his/her duty/responsibility to get exploited the same (Dilts et al., 2012). In a Bollywood movie, "Toilet ek prem Katha" in a scene it has been portrayed those women in rural India used to go away from the home to the fields for toilet, it had been become habit and routine work of their life to face the torched lights while they were in the process of defecating and they feel ashamed and try to veil down. Later on, they realized that now it is natural and forgotten that it was structural exploitation/violence against them by the patriarchal society, which does not allow to make a toilet in home to defecate. However, men were free to defecate outside the village at any time but women were allowed to go for defecation late evening and early morning only. It means by social pressure they (women) were the victim of structural violence, and their realization was dead against structural violence in the form of they were made to think that in the name of religion they were not able to demand a house equipped with toilet in their homes (S. N. Singh, 2017). Here it is important to note that a continuous structural violence or exploitation becomes so natural that a victim thinks that it is natural (Gupta, 2012; Kleinman, 2000) and not constructed and bears the same likewise normal routine life as it has had happened in the movie. Still in India in spite of defecation free declarations made by government officials open defecation practice exists at large level especially in rural India (Soe, 2019). Over all, in most of the villages' just based society does not exist compared to it in cities the use of toilet for defecation is more prevent (Caruso et al., 2019). Likewise, the same migrant laborers are made to think that 'get exploited' is their 'fate' (Mcduie-Ra, 2013) by their employer in homeland and host land, however, the exploitation continued making laborers helpless and is conditional and structured in nature. Lee (1966), Push-Pull theory of migration and Ravenstein's (1985) Laws of Migration also exhibits the same doctrine but, in another form, where former propound that there are push factors available at the origin such as unemployment, low wages, political and psychological forces etc. and later one elaborates that from the periphery to center migration takes place due at center developmental activity attracts a migrant and provides greater security than origin and is motivated by primarily economic reasons (Kainth, 2010). A migrant has an alternative if s/he stays in home country. To shift from one place to another in the presence of exploitation is unavailable if a migrant stays in abroad (Smith, 2016, pp. 6-105). Therefore, an abroad migrant also faces more structured exploitation due to unavailability of alternative employment opportunity like home country.

## 2. Research Setting

The study is based on purposive sampling technique, and a semi structured interview schedule was developed to conduct the study from the gulf countries returned migrants. The universe of the study was eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. A large number of informal sector laborers migrate every year to Gulf countries from the region due to less availability of employment and low wages. Thirty-five respondents were interviewed for the study from Azamgarh, Ballia, Deoria, Gorakhpur and Mau districts of Uttar Pradesh (one of a states of India). The subsequent section elaborates on how and in what condition an emigrant faces what level of exploitation in host land by the employer.

## 3. Trouble and exploitations encountered by migrant laborers in host countries

In November 2019, Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedhan responded to a parliamentary query by revealing approximately 33,988 Indian migrant laborers have died in the Gulf since 2014. Saudi Arabia had the highest death rate, having 1,920 workers died. In addition, the Ministry received 15,501 complaints of labour exploitation from Indian embassies inside the six Gulf nations between January to October 2019. Late and nonpayment of wages, denial of labour rights and benefits, non-issuance and renewal of residency permits, denial of weekly allowance and overtime, denial of weekly holidays, and forced excessive hours were among the most common complaints.

Even after the legal framework reform and improvement at the global level, labourers still face hostile living conditions while staying in camps in host countries and becoming victims of exploitation. However, when departing from the home country, they are promised to get all basic standard facilities. They are denied to make social capital and roam around because their passports are taken away from them just after their first meeting with the employer (Ray & Moukarbel, 2006). The exploitation happens with them more when the migrant is the first-time abroad mover to work in a foreign country. Due to high turnover, labourers are lured to move and get mistreated by the recruitment agencies (Xiang, 2001). Some agencies lie and promise false wages to be paid to illiterate and

semi-trained labourers (U. Singh, 2020). And one decides to move for a better opportunity to go abroad.

After reach at host land, the first and foremost issue is the language. Most of the respondents mention that language is one of the most difficult causing barriers to the smooth functioning of the daily routine and conversation for a long time. However, when they reach the destination, where one relative is already there, they face relative minuscule challenges. While on the other hand, if one arrives in a new place, where no relatives or friends stay, one must learn the same (language) as soon as possible. This problem is what everybody has to go through in the host land. The migrants have to give their passports to their masters immediately after arrival to restrict movement. In other words, they are bound to work under the same master till the contract period would over. To substantiate this, it is worth quoting the excerpt from Rajan and Joseph's work (2013):

“Saudi Arabia’s Labour laws are drafted to render migrants to their local sponsor or *kafeel*. The *kafala* permits employers to confiscate the migrant’s passport for the duration of their employment, limiting their freedom of movement and leaving the worker at the employer’s mercy” ..... (Rajan & Joseph, 2013, p. 144).

As one of the respondents likewise Rajan and Joseph reports that:

*“Everywhere, only poor labourers are exploited. Whenever someone gets a chance, the labourers get harassed. Somehow, I went abroad (Saudi Arabia) after taking borrowings. There (Saudi Arabia) too, unfavourable luck was with me. I have had a relative living in Saudi for many years; after asking him several times for a visa, he provided me with a visa, and he had sent such a visa that I was blessed with. After going there, the Arabi (master) did not offer me a salary. In the initial stage, he kept giving me money only for my basic needs; later, he deducted three months' salary when he started offering a salary. On asking him why he was doing that, he replied that he deducted the visa cost. Then, I said, “I had already given the visa cost to the relative who gave me the visa”. Then, the Arbi (master) says that I did not get the money and said it takes capital to get the visa issued; that is why I deducted it from your salary. For a few days, everything went all well for almost six months; after that, I did not know what had happened, and he stopped giving me money. I was forced to come back only in two years; however, the visa was for three years, and that too two years somehow I spent; later on, he gave me a salary, but not of six months. On coming here to India, I met that relative and complained that if this happened to me, he would make me a fool and said that the visa was given to him by a friend, so he was not aware. However, he had got the visa and cheated on me, knowingly everything. It is also important to note that a migrant realizes that everywhere labourers are the victims of exploitation”. (Guddu, 45 Years, Patkhauri, Deoria). (This is too much )*

From the above expression, it is clear that there are instances of monetary exploitation in the host country as well as in the home country (six months' salary had not been paid). Cheating is prevalent in the home country with a migration aspirant. Even a relative can deceive (it is not informed by a visa provider that twice a migrant may be required to pay the actual cost of a visa), once in the home country and another in the host country. And most of the migrants bear the expenses by taking borrowings from friends and relatives.

One of the other respondents expressed that:

*“There is always a struggle for a migrant, whether he lives here in his homeland or host land. Here it suits best a stanza recited by Tahir Faraz on the occasion of Dubai Mushaira 2016. “Zindagi tere Ta-aakumb men hum itna chalte hain ki mar jaate hain!*

*In the race of life, we move as much as till death comes”. (Hassan, 27 years, Astu-pura, Mau)*

The above stanza elaborates that a migrant has the realization of struggle in life. For life's basic requirements, he (a migrant) struggles for his whole life till the life ends.

Likewise, the following section intends to draw attention to the issues, plights and exploitations that the masters or kafeels do over the workers. This section will divulge the obnoxious side of the labour diaspora. This section also reveals specific cases that substantiate the exploitations and other difficulties faced by the labourers in the host land.

#### **4. Economic Exploitation and Unfree labour**

Labourers are not free from exploitation anywhere globally, especially when one is in the host land (Shelley, 2007). Women migrants are more vulnerable in this regard, not only from India but in other developing countries also (Nisrane et al., 2020). One is helpless to bear the exploitation due to less unawareness regarding the host land's laws, rules and regulations and other unfavourable conditions (Austin, 2006). Universally, it has been observed that the enduring universal financial and economic disaster support the exploitation and adverse outcomes for susceptible labourers (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2008), who may fail to secure their positions in the ongoing downturn

or can stay in jobs confronting deteriorating circumstances and diminutions in the wage (Waite et al., 2015, p. 2). For example, a respondent who quit the job because of low pay in home country was the victim of plight; as he elaborates:

*“I went to Saudi Arabia to serve as Ghar Khata, i.e., for domestic help. My salary was nearly twenty thousand Indian rupees. Everything was fine until the master opened a hotel, with the mutual concern with me. The hotel could not function as it was expected and get closed within two months. Then the master got angry and argued with me, “I (Kaffel or employer) opened the hotel upon your request. Since the hotel did not run well and get closed; therefore, I will cut your salary to compensate for my losses incurred”. Then the kafeel started deducting the salary. I did not get any penny, and further disputes continued between the master and me. However, the master recovered all his losses from me. I was without money in the host land and could not send a rupee for sustenance to my family. Anyway, I was lucky because my brother was under another master in the neighbouring area; he afforded the expenses of mine.*

*Meanwhile, the dispute was settled between me and the master, “The master provided only my passport and an air ticket fare to return home”. He did not give any penny to me. Finally, I returned empty-handed to the homeland. So, my dream of host land as an ideal place for earning livelihood gets devastated. I suffered economically, got exploited and was fenced in psychological trauma as I was away from my family for the earning and sustenance. Therefore, I had gone through multiple psychological, economic, and emotional trauma”. (Ram Avadh, 30 Years, Gaderua, Azamgarh).*

To substantiate this kind of atrocity on migrant workers, the study conducted by Rajan and Joseph (2013) reveals the similar instances where it had been documented as:

*“Domestic workers are an especially disadvantaged segment of society, exposed to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Most domestic workers in the kingdom live a life of isolation, confined to their employer’s home. They are susceptible to gender discrimination and prejudice and are accorded little value” (Rajan & Joseph, 2013, p. 145).*

From the above responses of return migrants, it is clear that even if the employer makes a mistake, the risk would have to be borne by the migrants. And it has also been described by the victims that financial and psychological exploitation also exists in host countries against helpless migrants. Moreover, it is also significant to mention that the Baddu (the original inhabitant of the host land, the tribe) people are very harsh as far as the Ghar Khata is concerned. Rather than the Saudi people, i.e., city dwellers, they (Baddu who live in rural areas) are crueller in west Asian countries. The ensuing section elaborates on the same.

## 5. Structural violence and the helpless migrants

Structural violence is ultimately embodied and manifested in acts of interpersonal violence (Waite et al., 2015, p. 82). Most of the time if victim let it happen then it continues increasing (Elias, 1993). As one of the respondents elaborates that:

*“As a driver for a family of a Saudi individual; I was assigned to do other home-based work in the Saudi (employer) home aside driving. Initially, I performed all the tasks assigned to me, but the workload continued increasing during the time passes. The master calls me any time, even while I was sleeping. If I get late due to necessary personal engagement; scolding, abuse, and nasty comments, the master starts passing on me. On a day, offensive comments became the root cause of the dispute between the master and me. This dispute led physical violence against the me. The master beaten me and even not provided food. Later on, I asked him for Khuruch<sup>1</sup> (to suspend the visa agreement). The Saudi man did the same Khuruch. In this way, the idea of host land as an ideal place for earning a better livelihood got shattered. I came back to my home without earning enough as I had expected before going”. (Ramadhar, 36 years Barjala, Azamgarh).*

Sometimes, employees return to their homeland not only with an empty hand in terms of accumulated wealth but also with the dark and horrifying experience of the host country. It would be a tough time for them to forget such bad remembrances. As mentioned above, Ram Adhar describes the violent incident; in such a situation, expectations are gotten destroyed. This kind of unethical treatment taking place by the masters against their migrant employees in the host land proves the existence of structural violence and exploitation. Another one of the migrants expresses:

<sup>1</sup> In the local language, it is used to suspend the agreement, to which the master has the right.

*"I could not know what had happened with Kafeel (master); one day, when he saw me after getting down from his vehicle, quickly he ran away towards me and started beating me. I started crying; no one was near to me. Finally, he told me, "Now you go anywhere, and I (kafeel) don't want to see your face again". I asked for my passport and some money he threw it over my face, only the passport. And he did not give me any money after waiting for some money for two days, in the night, when I realised that I would die without food and water. I left and reached an unknown place on foot, near fifteen to twenty kilometres. I asked some unknown persons to reach the airport; one of the persons left me near Jeddah airport. I got jailed for a month due to not having kafeel's (master's) permission to go home on my passport. Later on, the administration of Saudi Arabia adjusted with Kafeel and arranged a ticket for me. Finally, I returned to my home without any money. And lastly, I thanked God and decided not to go abroad anywhere" (Shahbaz, 36 Years, Bheera, Mau).*

From Shahbaz's experience, it can be argued that even without telling any reason, the monetary and physical exploitation of the migrants prevails abroad. Labourers stay helpless, and the host country's administration does not favour migrants; they (the host country's administration) adjust with locals and deport migrants without monetary benefit.

Moreover, there is not only structural violence and exploitation, but also hostile living conditions and ill-treatment are provided to the migrant labourers; the following section sheds light on the same.

## **6. Vulnerability amid Nature of work, hostile living conditions and variance in pay**

The poor incompetent, semi-skilled labourers frequently put their life and family's investment reserves at stake to move to Gulf nations. Distressed individuals to discover a promising career in Gulf nations approaches private agencies. They (aspirants) think that accepting this will open the door to pain-free income, while these organisations enjoy exploitative practices by conspiring with the planned business. It is uncovered by the Indian transients that they were misused by the one who gave jobs just as the businesses from multiple points of view, for example, visa retaining, disavowal of guaranteed occupation or compensation and exploitation (U. Singh, 2020). When one cannot find or secure a suitable job in their parent country, especially those with a rural background, they try to explore the world for better livelihood and earning (Moser et al., 2001, p. 59). Sometimes, those who are lucky find the desired place but unlucky face the trajectory that remains for a long time in their memories. This section describes the exploitation which had taken place regards to the nature of work.

During The field visit, the researcher met with Haseeb, a person who was one of the most qualified, having an MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree from Delhi and went as a sales executive in a mall in Dubai. Describes that:

*"Conversely, I was informed that I had to drive a truck to get the goods and then sell them in a mall. I was not satisfied with the workload, responsibility of the job and the salary. Moreover, I had to stay in a camp made up of clothes. I argued that this type of work is not done in India by a sales executive and the rest of the world. In India, the sales executive holds to sell the goods only, and the rest of the work is done by other persons. All the employees working in such situation told that here you have to follow the instruction; otherwise, you will be send back. However, I had to stay there to do the job because I had to support my family left behind in my homeland. I wanted to return as my tenure got over, I did the same. And thought I would go to earn under another company. Now I will go to another company it was not a good experience in Dubai, I suffered a lot in Dubai". (Haseeb, 29 Years, Ghosi, Mau).*

Rajan and Joseph (2013) documented a similar kind of study. However, it was not performed on the migrant from eastern UP, although it is worth quoting here because the host land is the same.

*'A woman migrant was assigned to do a teaching job, but upon arrival, she was forced to serve multiple household activities; often, her day was passing working up to 18 hours a day. Though, she was informed at the time of departure by the agent that she would be getting 2800 Saudi riyals. She never got said remuneration and was forced to work as a domestic helper' (Rajan & Joseph, 2013, p. 145).*

Still, this example clarifies the reality about Indian travel recruitment agencies that pass misinformation and, as a result, migrants suffer exploitation in the host country.

On the other hand, a migrant, Mohammed Zahid, went to Saudi Arabia as a driver in a household of a Saudi kafeel (Employer) elaborates similar experience:

*"My salary was equal to 25000 Indian rupees, excluding the meals. When I reached there, the master provided*

me with the same wage but did not agree to pay the driving allowances as mentioned in the agreement, and also the agent had informed about the same, that I will get food and other allowances also. Moreover, there was another migrant in the same house who was Sudanese and not getting any other allowances. So, the master did not provide me. I asked my kafeel to let me return to my homeland, but the master did not allow me to return. Because the Sudanese employee had gone to his home on leave, the master said I could go home when the Sudanese is returned". (Mohammad Zahid, 27 years, Bhaluwan, Gorakhpur)

Hostile living conditions and extended duty hours are common issues in gulf countries (Gatti et al., 2013; Moyce & Schenker, 2018, p. 358), especially for those in the driving profession. As one of the respondents tells that:

"I went to Saudi Arabia as a domestic driver. However, after reaching the destination, I had to overcome the difficulties. I had to live in a plywood cabin, and the air conditioner was not available in the same; the weather was scorching, and in general, in every dwelling place in the region, an AC room is expected. The duty hour was not fixed. My master used to call me at any time, while I was sleeping or eating. I was forced to live there to recover expenses that had occurred in the homeland for the travel and visa etc. however; I could not hold myself in the host land for a more extended period. Eventually, I returned from Saudi by breaking the tenure within one year; however, the term to stay was for three years". (Mangal Maurya, 24 Years, Deogawn, Azamgarh).

Migrants are vulnerable and face more exploitation when they go to the individual household (Pande, 2013). There are fewer problems and exploitation when migrants are employed in any established company than (migrants) go under the *Ghar khata* (domestic helper). Therefore, it can be deciphered that the formal system of labour and employment is less exploitative than the informal system of Arabs. This kind of exploitation persists because of the lack of knowledge of legal rules and regulations regarding the work and workplace or, in other words, proper fair labour law. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the Government of India's existing 'Ministry of External Affairs signed an agreement with the Ministry of Labour of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2016 with a validity of 5 years for the recruitment of General Category Workers (Kumaraswamy & Quamar, 2018) from India'. This agreement had been done to ensure their rights and obligations and remove the malpractices such as salary reduction and other things in the host country Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, 2017). However, this agreement did not save or could do a favour to the domestic workers because the very definition of the general category of workers does not include the domestic worker under its scope. Hence, the respondents of this section, as they are mostly gone under the domestic help, could not avail the benefit of the agreement. In addition, illiteracy and unawareness about legal action add more problems to labour migrants' concerns and prospects and are the root cause of exploitation. There is also a palpable fear regarding filing complaints that this is not my own country; I will be heard here or not; because of this issue, many victims do not complain while staying in another country, and suffering continues.

## 7. Conclusion

Migrants leave their home country for a better hope. Due to low socioeconomic status, a migrant takes help for occurring expenses for a visa, passport, and travel expenses from money lenders, friends, and relatives; sometimes, they sell their valuable property for a better livelihood chance abroad. These migrants are mostly from developing countries, and they fall under semi-skilled labourers. Primarily, the push factor in the source country is unemployment and a low wage rate for the workers. During the processes from passport get made until flight boarding, at different junctures, they (migrants) get exploited in the home country by the different state channels in the name of document verification for passport to an agent takes high charges for an excellent visa. After facing exploitation in the home country for a better source of income and life, labourers also get trapped abroad under kafeel and get structural exploited until they leave the host land. Therefore, it can be said that labourers are not free from exploitation anywhere in the world. Indian government should make policies favouring the migrant's welfare, and under the government's vigil, every worker should be protected from violence and exploitation.

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