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MIGRANT LABOR IN DUBAI  
STORIES OF BETRAYAL, SURVIVAL AND STRUGGLE FOR ACCEPTANCE ON  
FOREIGN LAND

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfilment of requirement  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Meek School of Journalism and New Media

by  
MRUDVI BAKSHI  
August 2017

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last couple of years, migrant labor rights in Dubai have been under constant scrutiny. Repeatedly criticized for mistreating its vast unskilled-labor force, Dubai has put into place many recent initiatives to uplift their conditions. This research focuses on what it is like to be a part of the migrant labor force in the city. The lives of three characters in the migrant community are explored at length. When migrant workers are acknowledged and made to feel involved with the greater community outside the labor force they seem more content, are able to deter alienation, and are better able to put behind them the agitation of leaving their hometowns. The paper will abbreviate United Arab Emirates as UAE or call it Gulf / GCC from here on.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those that helped make this thesis possible. Thank you to all the workers who felt confident enough to share their stories with me. Your positivity and perseverance inspired me to become a better person. A heartfelt thank you to Aliyah, Sapan and Raji for believing that I could do justice to their stories. It was a pleasure getting to know you all and I can confidently say I have made new friends for life. Thank you to Mr. Surendra Singh Kandhari for giving me access inside the factory and temple and allowing me to spend an entire day with the workers. Thank you to NGO worker Manjula for providing me with leads without which getting to other sources for the feature would not have been possible. Thank you to migrant experts Vittorio Longhi and Silvia Giagnoni for sharing their expertise on the subject. Your personal insights gave the much-needed emphasis to structure the story better. Thank you to my thesis chair committee Joseph Atkins for believing in me until the very last minute. Without your guidance and editing the feature wouldn't have come out the way it has. Thank you, professor Gregory and Dr. Swain for such great suggestions and being patient with me through the writing process. Your proofreading and advice during the last few days have been invaluable. To my family, friends and mentors thank you for being supportive while I worked on my thesis, and Ole Miss for giving me the best two years of my life.

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this magazine feature is to delve into the lives of unskilled migrant workers in Dubai. It will go deep into the journeys of immigrants, their struggles to fit in, the dreams they've envisioned for themselves and their families, and their anxiousness to go back home. It will highlight the differences in working and living conditions of workers engaged in all kinds of manual labor. An attempt will be made to compare migration trends in the city over the years and to see if some striking contrasts exist in the pattern. A lot has been spoken and written about the working and living conditions of workers, and I would address this in my piece, the central theme of this narrative is to understand these workers and their struggle to fight alienation and seek avenues to gain acceptance within a society that is completely alien to them.

For decades now Dubai has welcomed thousands of low-wage migrant workers. Promoting multicultural diversity and, the ability for them to foresee a better future for their families in a global market space, the city is known for arousing hope among migrants. Many of their decisions to move are fuelled by tales of riches in a country that contrasts so much with their own rural backgrounds.

You find them everywhere in Dubai--laying brick to brick at construction sites, waiting tables at restaurants and cafeterias, delivering items door to door, sweeping clean toilets and floors at malls, in crowded markets coaxing you to buy items you don't need.

Filled with hope and anxiety, these are people who leave their squalid hometowns and embark on a journey filled with uncertainty as to what awaits them. They leave behind ailing mothers, debt-ridden fathers, children who grow up in the absence of a parent, and homes where they've spent their childhood. They arrive with an expectation that the receiving country will provide better paying jobs and create remittances that will in turn benefit their families back home, pull them out of poverty, and elevate their standard of living.

Their circumstances indeed make them different from us, but like all humans they also seek acceptance from their new surroundings and have certain expectations from these ventures away from home. Being a migrant myself helps me relate to their situation.

Twenty-five years old Aliyah Siddiqui grew up in a small city tucked in the suburbs of Dhaka in eastern Bangladesh. Everything was going well within the family of 10 until one day her father chose to give up his well-paying government job leaving them struggling for two good meals in a day. Aliyah was forced to drop out of fifth grade and distance herself from her school-going friends. With no other bread winner at home, things were beginning to get rough at the Siddiqui's. Unable to afford medicines for her ailing mother, Aliyah took up a daily wage job as a seamstress after learning the skill from her neighbour and thereon took up the responsibility of her family. Her siblings left their responsibility behind as soon as they were married off. Some of her relatives based in Dubai suggested she move to the city where she could easily find menial jobs that would pay her well. In 2008 Aliyah left for Dubai and had a successful two years before she returned. She left again in 2012, this time only to realise once she landed in Dubai, she was duped by the agent who made her travel arrangements. Five years later, Aliyah is among the illegal migrants in the city dodging from cops so as not to end up in



prison, although sometimes she wishes she would get caught so she could go back home to her family.

I met Sapan Kocknush,, a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade dropout, at a marble factory in Al Quoz. Dubai was his only hope to lift his family out of their dire situation in Bangladesh. Back in 2003 when he left for the city, life was as he had envisioned it to be. Over the years his expectations from the city changed and the desire to live a better life for himself became his priority. He narrates his journey to me.

Raji Bala, my third character, feels privileged to be working as a domestic help, where she's treated like family. Having had a turbulent past with her previous employers, she is grateful to Dubai for giving her just enough to keep her children content. My neighbour for over a decade, Raji wasn't hesitant in narrating her story to me.

While conducting extensive interviews in Dubai in late 2016 and early 2017, I realized the common thread connecting my subjects was their eternal attachment to their family and their quest in providing them with all that they were unable to achieve for themselves. They are uncertain of how long they can survive away from home but while at it they wish to eliminate at least one of the burdens they carry: concern for the well-being of their families. Many smile as they tell of sending needed money back home despite how little they are able to save for themselves.

## BACKGROUND

The following section includes the background information about the history of migration to the Gulf and why the growth of the nation has to be credited to its large migrant workforce.

### **History**

Around the 1950s and 1960s, much before its popularity as an oil-rich oasis, the Gulf was predominately known for its pearl diving industry (Vora, 2013), which led to the establishment of strong trade ties between the Arabian Gulf and its Asian and Persian neighbours. The dominance of the pearl industry and the existence of Indian and Persian merchants gave birth to new trade relations between the Gulf and its neighbours across the Indian Ocean.

The Indians and Persians helped spark migration to and from the nation and ever since the Gulf has been a hub for immigrants across different nationalities.

During the 1980s and 1990s many of the migrants came from Arab countries, including Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen and Iraq. But gradually towards the end of the era, a rapid influx in Asian workers almost displaced the Arabs, and it has continued since. Although Arabs were preferred considering their common customs and traditions, they came with long-term agendas that became seemingly difficult for the receiving countries to abide by. The GCC realised they needed workers who came without their families, made little use of public service, and did not put economic or political demands on employers or the state. In other words, the demand for pliable workers increased, those who complied with orders, were willing to work long hours and not demanding as to labor conditions (Weiner, 1995). Labor and construction industries

where most of this work force was centralized, and they attracted much of the Asian labor force right after the much-anticipated boom in the oil industry. This caused the shift popularly known as ‘Asianization’ of migrant labor (Kamrava and Babar, 2012). With the success that oil reserves brought, most of the revenue was utilized in building the picturesque landscape of the country we see today.

### **The migration process and the lure of big cities**

The initial stages of the migration process began in the sending countries. Agencies have agents in different countries (referred to as middle men) who arrange a contract between the worker and employer in the destination country. These agents apply for the work visa, handle employment contracts for these workers glorifying the receiving country to such extents that workers are ready to pay exorbitant prices charged by these agents for their services. According to a Human Rights Watch 2006 report, these agents churn out approximately \$2,000 to \$3,000 from each of these workers. These workers are commonly acknowledged as contract workers (Zachariah el.2003), or as guest workers (Weiner 1995) in the UAE where immigrants are not granted citizenship.

Overseas migration most often stems from the desire to get out of poverty, and it forces many young migrants to leave behind their families, a compromise they’re willing to make despite the bleak chances of visiting them until the end of their contract period.

Over the years, India has been consistent in exporting the largest groups of foreign population to the GCC and is also considered more reliant in terms of remittances flow. Money coming from sending workers to the Gulf make up a large part of the GDP in some Indian states, such as Andra Pradesh and Kerala (Vora, 2013). Following them is the Philippines which views immigration as the key to the upliftment of its citizens due to the lack of local employment and job opportunities.

## METHODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted in Hindi, and communicating in the native language predominately spoken within the Asian community helped ease the workers considerably. Some of them were interviewed in their factories. Male domestic help could only be interviewed during their day off when they prefer visiting the malls nearby.

I observed that domestic help had comparatively flexible work routines, working eight to nine hours a day. Those working in factories and mills could not exceed their designated one-hour break.

The major obstacle faced during the full month of reporting was the apprehensiveness of people concerned about going on record about their living and working conditions. Considering the limited time on hand this worked against me. Another drawback was not being able to get access to labor camps, primarily due to their strict visiting policies and for safety reasons. Women are generally recommended to abstain from visiting alone. Therefore, I had to make do with visiting malls rather than the labor camps--where the workers come on their day off.

During my time reporting in the field, I expected to hear what I have heard over the years about the ill-treatment of these workers, and how unhappy they were about their decision to move. Despite a few exceptions, many of those interviewed had a lot good to say about their working conditions and very thankful to have had the opportunity to get out of their respective hometowns.

In addition to my interviews with workers, I also interviewed local journalists, NGO officials, labor experts, migration researchers, and others about the migrant worker issue. My research includes a wide range of articles and books on the issue as well.

This will be a story that focuses more on the migrants themselves and their journeys than the shifting policies that attempt to govern their lives. It's a story worth telling, and one that can resonate across a world where migration seems to be a permanent fixture of the global economy.

## CONCLUSION

In my quest to understand the lives of these workers I explored places and situations which I perhaps wouldn't have despite being raised in the same city. It was moving to hear most of them sharing how they try and keep themselves engaged (probably doing overtime at work) so they do not miss their families back home. Contrary to the belief enforced by several media reports of the workers being exploited and forced to live in foul conditions, I found another issue that was more seriously grappling them. It wasn't until I visited and spent some time around them did I realise it was their intense feeling of alienation fostered by a mundane routine and their inability to blend in with the larger community outside their labor quarters. It wasn't until I spoke to several of them engaged in different types of labor did I realise that they yearn for someone to sit down talk to them and share a mutual feeling of respect and acknowledge their presence.

During my research I came across numerous initiatives put forward by several NGOs that seek to address this concern. Faced with such a huge population of migrants, they are constantly trying out ideas where these laborers can enjoy their free time away from work. It was interesting to see that many of these efforts required active community involvement in the form of donations and volunteering. Throughout the process of reporting for this story I was able to build a strong understanding with my interviewees and personally understand what their expectations are from the city.

Conducting interviews for over a month I realized how little I earlier was engaged in helping the upliftment of these individuals, and I am thankful to have learned about it although much later than I perhaps should have.

Therefore, to bridge this gap henceforth I will make a conscious effort to get myself involved in contributing to the best of my ability so that the next time a worker smiles I can feel a sense of contentment in perhaps being the reason.

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Graduate Assistant, 2015-2017  
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Gulf News, Dubai  
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