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Novel Coronavirus and Indian Overseas Labour Migrants: Updates from Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

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The ever-increasing contagion of Novel Coronavirus has reached almost 200 countries worldwide and infected more than 2 million people by mid-April 2020. Knowingly or unknowingly, the crisis has significantly underlined the distinction between national and non-national at the global level, specifically in the case of migrant workers. The crisis has likewise affected India's thirty-two million overseas community, one of the largest international migrant group in the world. Among these overseas Indians, workers living in Gulf Cooperation (GCC) countries are more vulnerable considering their temporary employment tenure and harsh working and living condition. Most of these workers staying in the six Gulf countries live within the lower strata and has limited access to healthcare and preventive mechanisms. In this context, this article looks into the status of Indian labour migrants living in GCC, in the wake of the ongoing global humanitarian crisis, i.e., Novel Coronavirus Crisis.

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Introduction:

The world is globalized today, so does, problems and challenges. The 2019-20 coronavirus pandemic has affected all facets of global society significantly and severely. Nearly 200 countries irrespective of their global economic status and human development ranking have suffered the loss of human and capital alike³. The spread of Novel Coronavirus from the Wuhan province of China to nearly 200 countries of the world is the perfect example of globalization in current time (WHO, n.d.). As of 19 April 2020, more than two million people in the world are infected from this virus which has resulted in more than one hundred and forty thousand death. These incidents have been recorded from almost all countries of the world (WHO, n.d.). The spread of the virus has become critical in all major economies of the world and has severely exposed the deteriorating healthcare infrastructure in the world.

One of the most precise and dependable action came in the form of ‘lockdown’ by almost all affected countries in the world. The very basic idea was to ensure social distancing to avoid person to person infection. While the measure was indeed a vital intervention, the impact on the social and economic condition of the society was uncalculated and unanticipated. Various issues such as lack of food supply, insensitive employer-employee relationship, unhygienic living condition, lack of financial preparation and absence of planned governance became significantly visible soon after the implementation of lockdown. Countries like Brazil and India had to make several changes to ensure the implementation of lockdown. While these regulative changes were implemented, keeping in mind the problem of citizens in general, the specific case of migrant workers was largely ignored.

According to the World Migration Report published by the International Organization for Migration (2020), more than 289 million population in the world is mobile. The impact of coronavirus on the migrant population has made significant space in the international media debate. The plight of migrant workers came out from all corners of the world. CNN international reported about the problem of Romanian workers in United Kingdom⁴. The crisis of migrants in the United Kingdom was reported to be more prominent considering proposed Brexit. Questioning proposed social distancing norms, The Guardian wrote about cramped migrant workers' dormitories in Singapore, where thousands of more infections are expected to emerge⁵. South China Morning Post also looked into the dormitory crisis in Singapore and possible infection escalation⁶. The case of stranded European migrants hailing for poor regions also made significant space worldwide. The Guardian reported that many European workers are now caught in a no-man’s land, with border closures, no repatriation flights. Many of the workers have also lost their jobs and may have consumed all their savings and

³COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Retrieved on 18 April 2020 from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

⁴ Reynolds, E (17 April 2020). Coronavirus may force the UK to rethink its relationship with migrant workers. *CNN*.

⁵, Ratcliffe, R. (17 April 2020). Singapore's cramped migrant worker dorms hide COVID-19 surge risk. *The Guardian*.

⁶ Sim, Dewey and Xinghui, K (17 April 2020). How did migrant worker dormitories become Singapore's most significant coronavirus cluster? *South China Morning Post*.

has limited or no access to a state safety net by virtue of anomalous social security provisions. If they do manage to return home, some face the suspicion that they have brought the virus with them⁷.

In the case of India, two broader sets of issue can be observed. First is the case of internal migrants. The issue of migrant workers in India became an international issue and is being significantly discussed by various media agencies. Al Jazeera quoted that the migrant workers in India are left without money, food and promised government aid⁸. The issue of Indians stranded abroad was also discussed by various media agencies. In one of the interviews to The Hindu, S. Irudaya Rajan and Ginu Zacharia Oommen stated that "Migrants labourers have been among the worst-hit due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most Indian migrants in the GCC countries are at the bottom of the pyramid in their host countries". Taking note from the issues raised by various media houses and number of write-ups coming after corona crisis, this paper makes an attempt to look into the status of Indian migrant workers living in the GCC countries, in this time of ongoing corona pandemic.

The Making of Global Crisis: Novel Coronavirus

The origin of Novel Coronavirus also termed as COVID-19 has not been officially confirmed yet, since there are number of disputable arguments given by many countries. The first case was officially reported from Wuhan Province of China on 01 December 2019 (Ma, 2020). After confusion and lack of consensus over diseases, on 30 December 2019, a group of doctors from Wuhan Central Hospital termed the disease as "SARS-like Coronavirus" (The Economic Times, 2020).

The spread had no serious consideration for China in initial days, until significant number of pneumonia cases started reporting from all over Wuhan. During initial days, after every seven and half days, the cases used to double. The spread further reached to other provinces of China during Chinese New Year Migration (WHO–China Joint Mission, 2020. 'Chunyun' or Lunar New Year or Chinese New Year has been considered as largest human migration on the planet. It is estimated that nearly 3 billion journeys took place during approximately 40 days of celebration period (Wong, 2020). By 20 January 2020, 6174 people had already developed symptoms, since Wuhan is a transport hub and major rail inter-change (Li et al., 2020).

Nearly 40 days after the report of their first case, on 10 January, World Health organization issues a travel advisory and request travelers follow guidelines "to reduce the general risk of acute respiratory infections while travelling in or from affected areas (currently Wuhan City)" (Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Emergency Response Epidemiology Team, 2020). Till then, the actual process of transmission and spread of the virus was hardly known, even though the guidelines stated advised against "the application of any travel or trade restrictions on China". On 30 January 2020, it termed the outbreak as a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern". Further on 24 February, WHO issued a warning and termed coronavirus as possible

⁷ Erizanu, P. (16 April 2020). Stranded or shunned: Europe's migrant workers caught in no-man's land. *The Guardian*.

⁸ Puranam, E. (15 April 2020). India's migrant workers protest against lockdown extension. *Al Jazeera*.

pandemic and later declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020).

Overall, for nearly, three months, China and World Health Organization, kept delaying the strong measures and could not inform international community plainly. The migration of people to other countries such as Italy, other parts of Europe and United States of America was never stopped or screened appropriately. Further, after not having adequate warning from international health agency like WHO, world community kept undermining the pandemic and waited bit further than it could have. This resulted slow spread of disease to all parts of the world.

In India, initial three cases were reported in Kerala starting from 30 January 2020 among students arrived from Wuhan, China. For another, the cases were not identified. The number of cases started increasing only after 02 March 2020, when one Italy return person was found corona positive. For the next twenty days, the cases started reporting from various states of the country mostly from source region of China and Italy and few instances among Gulf returnees (The Economic Times, n.d.).

Snapshot of Indian Labour Migration

Internal and international migration from and within India has been a reality from quite some time. According to Census 2011, migration within India has been extremely significant, as 455 million Indians are living outside their home. At the same time, according to the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, 28.19 million Indians are also currently living abroad. This estimate includes Non-Resident Indians (NRI), which are 12.49 million and People of Indian Origin (PIO), which are 15.59 million (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

Internal migration within India has seen an increase of 36% between the census enumeration period of 2001 and 2011. Census of India has majorly documented the five important reason for migration; work/employment, business, education, marriage, moved after birth, moved with household and any other. As enumerated by Census 2011, 9.8% of people migrate for employment, 0.7% move for business, 1.1% students move for education, 46.3% migrate for marriage, 7.4% have moved after birth, 14.4% people have moved with households, remaining 20.6% have been categorized as 'Others'. While migrants as an overall group, who have left their home region are always on the verge of getting victimized. Among the 41 million (9.8%) people migrated for work, 35 million (84%) were male while 6.4 million (16%) were female (Census of India, n.d.). Further, a considerable number of people migrated as a student or after marriage, often start working. Considering the absence of updated data, this proportion of migrant status is vague.

International migration from India can be broadly divided into three broader different phases of migration, pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. Within the post-colonial phase of migration, two significant migration phenomena can be identified which are migration towards the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries and towards North America. According to the international migrant estimate published by Government of India, 4.5 million Indians are currently living in the United States of America (USA), among this 3.5 million are NRIs. In the Gulf, the United Arab Emirates host 3.42 million Indian workers.

Among other GCC countries, Bahrain host 10391 Indians, Kuwait has 1.02 million Indian workers, Oman has 0.78 million Indian working in their country, Qatar host 0.74 million workers and Saudi Arabi has 2.59 million Indians working in their country. Overall, GCC host nearly 8.5 million Indian workers (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

Nearly 470 million Indians, internal or external, excluding PIOs, who are currently living to any place other than their ‘home’ are with the possibility of getting mistreated by the host community, in the era of limited health resources and possible ‘sons of the soil’ movement. The issue has become significantly visible in the first week of lockdown in India itself, where informal workers from all parts of India started leaving their host region and walking towards their home country.

Indian Labour Migrants in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

A significant number of Indians migrated to the Middle East after the 1970s. Significant migration from India to the Persian Gulf began after the establishment of OPEC. Since then, an increasing number of semi and unskilled workers from South India have worked in the Gulf countries on temporary migration schemes in the oil industry and services and construction. Most come from the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh. These states have a historical connection with the gulf countries; they have large numbers of the Muslim population and had high unemployment rates when the migration to Gulf countries picked up in the 1970s. Successful migrants, with their increased earnings, then served as role models for many others in their villages and districts.

Migration to Gulf conceded mostly unskilled workers with a contract of 2-5 years. They are required to return home upon completion of the contract, in order to be eligible for a new contract. Family migration is sporadic in these countries, as laws of the Middle East countries bar an outsider from purchasing land. Thus, the Gulf countries offer little scope either for family migration and unification or for permanent residency and citizenship. Indian Emigration Act of 1983 regulates immigration employment of Indian Workers and takes care of safeguarding and welfare of the labourers. Under this act, this is a requirement for all recruitment agencies to register under Protector-General of Emigrants, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

Table 1: Indian Labour Migrants in GCC Countries (2015-2019)

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
United Arab Emirates	225718	163716	149962	112059	76112
Saudi Arabia	308380	165355	78611	72399	161103
Qatar	59384	30619	24759	34471	31810
Oman	85054	62236	5332	36037	28392
Kuwait	66579	72384	56380	57613	45712
Bahrain	15623	11964	11516	9142	9997

Source: Compiled from the statistics collected from www.emigrate.gov.in

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, nearly 8.5 million Indians are living in the Gulf countries. In 2019, 45 percent Indian workers went to Saudi Arabia, followed by United Arab

Emirates (22 percent), Kuwait (13 percent), Qatar (9 percent), Oman (8 percent) and Bahrain (3 percent). Although most Indians in the Gulf hold unskilled or semiskilled jobs, the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora⁹ (2003) estimates that 20 percent are white-collar workers and another 10 percent belong to the professional category. The annual number of semi or unskilled Indian workers going to the gulf countries more than quadrupled between 1999 and 2007, from about 160,000 to 777,000. Those going to the gulf countries in 2007 made up 96 percent of all workers requiring an emigration clearance check (Annual Report-2012, Office of Protector General of Emigrants, Ministry of External Affairs)¹⁰.

Novel Coronavirus and Indian Migrants in GCC Countries

According to The Hindu 3,336 Indians tested positive for coronavirus in 53 countries while 25 others died of the infection¹¹. In Kuwait, 530 confirmed cases are Indians. In Dubai, more than 500 Indians have been infected. The situation is similar in Qatar¹².

Indian labour migrants in GCC countries have at the several occasions required the interference of the Indian government. According to MADAD-Consular Services Management System of Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Indian workers have registered 59282 requested for repatriation and support in past years¹³. There have been cases of mismanagement under the Kafala system and other similar recruitment channels (Rajan at el., 2013). The crisis generated by COVID-19 is unparalleled, as it includes both an unprecedented public emergency and an unforeseen social and economic crisis that covers both the home country (India) and host region (GCC) together.

Table 2: Effect of Coronavirus on GCC Countries

Country	Total confirm cases*	Total Death*
United Arab Emirates	5825	35
Saudi Arabia	6380	83
Qatar	4103	07
Oman	1069	05
Kuwait	1524	03
Bahrain	1700	07
Total	20601	140

*As on 17 April 2020, collected from the website of the World Health Organization.

Table 2 placed above provides the details of corona spread in GCC countries. As on 17 April 2020, 20601 cases have been reported in the region, and 140 people have died. According to International Labour Organization, "the proportion of non-nationals in the employed

⁹ Report of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>

¹⁰ http://moia.gov.in/writereaddata/pdf/annual_report_2011-2012.pdf Accessed on 15 January 2014.

¹¹ The Hindu (16 April 2020). 3,336 Indians infected by coronavirus in 53 countries: Government sources. *The Hindu*.

¹² George, V. K. (11 April 2020). Coronavirus | Indian labourers in GCC countries, are in dire need of help, say experts. *The Hindu*.

¹³ Consular Services Management System, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved on 17 April 2020 from <http://www.madad.gov.in/AppConsular/welcomeLink>.

population in GCC countries is among the highest in the world with an average of 70.4 percent, ranging from 56 to 93 per cent for individual countries”¹⁴. Considering the fact that the migrants are 70.4 percent of total population, therefore, the total number of migrants with corona infection can be considered as 14,503. Further, as reported by Pethiyagoda, K. (2017), Indians in GCC are nearly 21 percent of total population. Further, it can be estimated that 4326 Indians living in GCC are possibly corona positive. The number comes very close to the total number of possible infections among Indians estimated by many media agencies.¹⁵.

The migrant workers staying in the regions are mostly semiskilled and unskilled with negligible skills to read and write their mother tongue. Most of the workers do not know Arabic. These workers usually stay in dormitory kind of places with crammed accommodation. Most of the dormitories are built outside city and accommodate hundred to thousand workers with common cooking and sanitation facilities (Dasgupta, 2020). Upon closure of enterprise, many workers are left stranded without financial means.

Almost all the GCC countries have restricted the movement of workers and have already created the quarantine zones in all the regions. The overall concept of social distancing has been implemented strictly in the region, and all the migrant settlements have been converted into restricted zones. While the impact is yet to be measured, institutions like Amnesty International and Migrantrights.org have expressed their concern over facilities provided to the workers in these zones. Some of the basic facilities such as healthcare and sanitation, adequate availability of food and water are yet to be verified. The issue of domestic workers is yet to be discussed and considered by the government and media agencies. Domestic workers, as they live inside the house and seldom have an opportunity to connect with the outer world, have lesser opportunity to put forth demand for their homeland return.

One of the sudden choices available with the migrant worker is to seek support from India to return home. The issue of return of the worker has been raised by number of state governments in India, primarily by Kerala, but the movement is not considered safe by healthcare agencies (Jacob, 2020). In previous occasions, where people returned from different GCC countries, state governments are yet to screen and track the movement. The influx of another group of migrants may lead to further chaos and can create difficulties. Further, the volatility among local residents with ever-increasing rumour also makes it difficult for the state to ensure safety of each returnee. Further, return of millions of working populations may also add to unemployment rolls in India. These factors again hinder the return of stranded Indians.

Ministry of Home Affairs in a letter-dated 27 March 2020 to all the States and Union Territories, recommended that the authorities prevent migration of workers from work region to home region (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.). The circular was issued to prevent the

¹⁴ Labour Migration, International Labour Organization. Retrieved on 19 April 2020 from <https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

¹⁵ Odisha Bytes (17 April 2020). Over 2000 Indians Infected By COVID-19 In Gulf Countries. *Odisha Bytes*. Retrieved 19 April 2020 from <https://odishabytes.com/over-2000-indians-infected-by-covid-19-in-gulf-countries/>

possible spread of coronavirus. In the letter, the states and UTs have also been recommended making these vulnerable groups aware of measures taken by the government, including the provision of free food grains and other essential items through PDS.

A huge chunk of workers from many countries and geographical regions are waiting for transportation. Indian government at nearly three occasions arranged flights, which includes flight from Wuhan, Malaysia and Philippines, however, in the specific case of labourers the arrangements are yet to be seen. Ironically, the government has made Corona Cell and Corona Helpline Number, but none of the embassies has made any arrangements for Indians stranded in the host countries, even when welfare funds like 'Indian Community Welfare Fund' are kept unused.

Life or Livelihood: Migrants' Dilemma

In one of the unique circular issued by Ministry of Home Affairs dated 29 March 2020, "MHA Order restricting movement of migrants and strict enforcement of lockdown measures", the government directed all the state authority to restrict the movement of the people. Further, the circular says that the shelter and accommodation of the migrant workers should be taken care. Further, the circular also directed the landlords to charge the rent for one month. Like any other recent order of the government, this order fails to recognize homeless and unregistered workers.

One of the important issues that arise here is why these workers attempted to leave their place of stay and attempted to return. The question that arises here is what happened to the workers. What forced these workers to walk this deadly path? While careful analysis of their life at the destination provides a simpler answer to this question. The issue was 'survival' which adhered with their sustainability. Condition of migrant workers at the destination usually has harsh working and living conditions. The entire migration process of workers creates a nexus of vulnerability and exploitation. There are migrant settlements outside almost major Gulf cities, where workers have no opportunity to buy grocery because of lockdown.

The overall workers' situation in the entire lockdown period could not have become a crisis if the Union and the State machinery have included migrant workers in their thought process. The chaos and confusion fully reflect that the biggest working class of current time was completely ignored by the policymakers of home and host countries before throwing the drastic decisions like total lockdown; especially, given the fact that China and Italy were already drastically suffering from Coronavirus and Government had significant information available to bail-out the measures in a more effective and less painful way.

Given this situation, workers had no choice but to seek shelter back home. For millions of workers, lockdown is not to save them from virus, and rather this is a visible threat on their social, economic and personal life. The movement cannot be considered as voluntary, the movement is forced, and millions of workers have already lost their choice.

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