



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

Workshop 7

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Living Together Separately: social and cultural implications of migration to the GCC countries

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Abstract

Much has been written about the phenomenon of migrant labour in the Gulf region, with extensive research on the processes whereby migrant are recruited, the working and living conditions which they experience when they are in the Gulf, the economic impact which they have on the host economies, the effects of labour migration on living standards in exporting countries, the distribution of migrant labour across the countries and regions of the Gulf, their break-down in terms of countries of origin, their housing conditions in host countries, and security concerns stemming from the dependence of Gulf countries on migrant labour.

So far, however, there has remained one area of great importance which has only been lightly researched, namely the social and cultural character and dynamics of the migrant communities which have grown up in the Gulf over the past 40-50 years. What kind of social and cultural life do these communities have? To what extent have they witnessed aspects of social and cultural development which are independent of those in their home countries? To what degree are they cohesive, and, if so, what is the basis of that cohesion? How much are they influenced by developments taking place in their home countries? How much influence are they having on the host communities, and how much have the host communities influenced the social and cultural life of the migrant communities? Are there specific forms of musical, literary or cultural production which have developed in these communities, which are distinctive to them? How do the different migrant communities relate to each other in terms of social contact and cultural exchange? Have the languages spoken by migrant communities come to incorporate terms and concepts which have been “borrowed” either from other migrant communities in the region or from the host communities? Which communities could be said to have exerted the greatest cultural and human impact on the host communities? Have the migrant communities remained engaged in the political concerns and contestations of their countries of origin, or have they developed new dimensions of political consciousness?

These, then, are the issues at the heart of the proposal which is being put forward and which are intended to form the *foci* of discussion. The emphasis is on attracting new research, putting the spotlight on dimensions of life in the Gulf which have so far attracted little attention.

Description and Rationale

Background

The Gulf countries that, in 1981, joined together to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman – began to attract foreign migrant workers in large numbers from the third decade of the last century. This was linked closely with the development of the oil industry in the region – the first well was drilled in Bahrain in 1931, followed by significant oil discoveries in other countries over the next two decades. From 2000 foreign workers in 1940, the number went to 16,000 in 1950. Though, at this point, most of the workers were citizens, their number gradually reduced vis-à-vis foreign workers, mainly from other Arab countries – in Kuwait in 1949, migrant workers were 68 percent, while in Qatar they were 44 percent.

The situation changed dramatically with the oil price boom from 1973, which brought unprecedented revenues into national coffers. The ruling families used this wealth for large-scale national development and extension of welfare services for citizens in the areas of – education, health, subsidised housing and employment in the public sector. This led to an exponential increase in the recruitment of migrant workers which, by 2010, significantly changed the demographic profile of the GCC states:

- I. In the GCC countries, **migrant workers** constituted 48 percent of the total population of about 47 million.
- II. In most GCC countries, **expatriates out-numbered citizens** – expatriates were 89 percent in the UAE, 86 percent in Qatar, 68 percent in Kuwait, and 51 percent in Bahrain; only in Saudi Arabia and Oman were citizens in the majority – 32 percent in the former and 39 percent in the latter.
- III. In the total **GCC workforce** of 18.9 million in 2012, expatriates were 69 percent, being 92 percent in the UAE, 94 percent in Qatar, 83 percent in Kuwait, 77 percent in Oman and Bahrain, and 55 percent in Saudi Arabia.
- IV. Expatriate workers are a dominant presence in the **private sector** in the GCC states – 88 percent in Qatar, 77 percent in Kuwait, 76 percent in Oman, 70 percent in Bahrain, and 51 percent in Saudi Arabia.
- V. In a marked shift from the earlier period, the bulk of the expatriate **workers in the GCC are now from Asia**—Arabs, who were about 85 percent of the expatriate work force in 1975, were less than 15 percent by 2004.
- VI. While the overwhelming majority of the expatriate force is male (with only the professionally qualified being allowed to bring wives and children with them), separately over a million **women** are also employed in the GCC states – most of them are in domestic service, while others are employed in the in the health and hospitality sectors.
- VII. Expatriate workers are a major source of **financial remittances** – funds that a source of valuable foreign exchange for their hard-pressed national economies and which qualitatively transform the lives of their families: remittances from the GCC to workers’ home countries were nearly \$ 100 billion annually in 2016, about 25 percent of global remittances, before the fall in oil prices and the pandemic brought about a reduction in expatriate workers in most GCC states.

This overwhelming presence of expatriates that have apparently little in common with the culture of the GCC states has required the latter to address two concerns: national security and the preservation of the status and cultural identity of citizens.

Security concerns have been addressed through the “kafala” (‘sponsorship’) system in terms of which the employer has full responsibility for the conduct of the employee. To ensure this, the employer has nearly full authority to control all aspects of the employee’s conduct at work and after work, including the right to terminate the employment and summarily deport the worker.

These are backed by several other legal constraints that effectively control the worker and limit his freedom – retention of his passport by the employer; restrictions on free movement from one town to another; harsh penalties for illegal sexual activity, consumption of alcohol, gambling, pornography, etc.; ban on association and trade union and political activity, and, in some instances, restrictions on religious or sectarian practices.

The superior status of citizens has been ensured by privileging the latter in terms of access to welfare schemes and facilities, while the cultural exclusiveness of citizens

has been achieved through institutionalizing the concept of “living together separately”, ie, ensuring minimal interactions between expatriates and citizens and between various expatriate nationalities with each other.

In recent years, many of the onerous rules and norms that imposed severe restrictions on expatriate workers have been relaxed:

- Both labour ministries and labour courts have become much more responsive to workers’ complaints relating to violations of contracts, mistreatment and abuse, etc.
- Judicial procedures are becoming more transparent.
- Diplomatic and consular access to labour camps and workers in prisons has improved.

At the same time, certain other developments also need to be noted:

- large numbers of young persons in GCC states, nurtured from birth in wealth, luxury and privilege, have become conscious of their ethnic and cultural superiority and have occasionally attacked foreign workers,
- instances of abuse of female workers continue in large numbers,
- the *kafala* system remains in place in most countries, with its attendant restrictions on the lives of expatriates,
- judicial proceedings, while being slowly reformed, still present problems of access for the aggrieved as they are expensive and often non-transparent, while the bargaining capacity of expatriates remains limited,
- while most GCC states have introduced long-term visas for selected residents, the policy in general is to view all expatriates as temporary workers,
- as oil prices have been fluctuating, some sections of the GCC have come to see the workers’ remittances as a “drain” on the national exchequers.
- It is also important to recall that security concerns and anxieties relating to cultural encroachments from the presence of expatriates are also linked with debates between national rulers and their citizens about the development model (and its diverse attributes, including its rentier character) and, in general, the model of governance that the states have adopted.

Objectives and Scope, and Contribution to the Field

In the light of the issues outlined in the Abstract, and of the background which has given rise to the existing migrant communities in the region, the objectives and scope of the workshop, and the intended contribution to the field, can be clearly defined: to deepen and expand knowledge and understanding of the nature and dynamics of these communities, how they relate to their home countries, how they communicate socially and culturally with each other, and how they impinge socially and culturally on the host communities. It is stressed that, unlike most earlier studies of migrant labour in the Gulf, our concern is with the social and cultural dimensions of the communities. Particularly missing from earlier work have been studies of experiences of expatriate life as depicted in the arts, literature and cinema, and the perceptions which host citizens hold of the millions of expatriates in their midst – generally providing services, but largely invisible as individual persons or cultural entities.

While the literature on the precise field we are interested in remains limited, we would encourage those submitting papers to take note of the following works, and where possible to build upon them:

1. Abdulahadi Khalaf, Omar AlShehabi, and Adam Hanieh (Ed), *Transit States: Labour, Migration, and Citizenship in the Gulf*, Pluto Press, November 2014
2. Omar AlShehabi, "Histories of Migration to the Gulf", in *Transit States*, at: https://www.academia.edu/35980625/Histories_of_Migration_to_the_Gulf
3. Andrea Wright, *Between Dreams and Ghosts: Indian Migration and Middle Eastern Oil*, Stanford University Press, November 2021
4. Charles Kenny, "The Gulf Migration Model: Can it be sustained?", Centre for Global Development, 8 October 2021, at: [The Gulf Migration Model: Can It Be Sustained? | Center For Global Development \(cgdev.org\)](https://www.cgdev.org/publication/the-gulf-migration-model-can-it-be-sustained)
5. Yara Jarallah, "Domestic Labor in the Gulf Countries", *Journal for Immigrant and Refugees Studies*, 7:3-15, 2009, at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15562940802687132?journalCode=wimm20>
6. John West, "Asian Migration to the Gulf", Asian Century Institute, 26 March 2014, at: [Asian Century Institute - Asian migration to the Gulf](https://www.asiancenturyinstitute.org/asia-migration-to-the-gulf)
7. Dr MK Gautam, "Indian Diaspora: Ethnicity and Diasporic Identity", CARIM-India Report 2013/29, at: [ethnicityanddiasporicidentity.pdf \(mea.gov.in\)](https://www.meai.gov.in/publications/ethnicityanddiasporicidentity.pdf)
8. Thomas Chambers, "Continuity in Mind: Imagination and migration in India and the Gulf", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 52, Issue 4, July 2018, at: [continuity_in_mind_imagination_and_migration_in_india_and_the_gulf.pdf \(cambridge.org\)](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-asian-studies/article/continuity-in-mind-imagination-and-migration-in-india-and-the-gulf/1F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F8F)
9. Wang, Yuting. *Chinese in Dubai: Money, Pride, and Soul-Searching*, Leiden and Boston: Brill.
10. Wang, Yuting. "Being Chinese Muslims in Dubai: Religion and Nationalism in a Transnational Space." *LSE Middle East Center Paper Series* (33), LSE Middle East Center, London, UK. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104583/>
11. Wang, Yuting. "Making Chinese Spaces in Dubai: A Spatial Consideration of Chinese Transnational Communities in the Arabian Gulf." *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9(2): 269- 287. DOI:10.1080/21534764.2019.1762313
12. John Calabrese, "India-Gulf Migration: A Testing Time", Middle East Institute, 14 April 2020, at: [India-Gulf Migration: A Testing Time | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-gulf-migration-a-testing-time)
13. Priyansha Singh and Mohammed Ameen Arimbra, "Indians in the Gulf: The Other Side of the Story", *Indian Migration Now*, 30 July 2019, [Indians in the Gulf: The Other Side of the Story | by India Migration Now | Medium](https://www.indianmigrationnow.com/indians-in-the-gulf-the-other-side-of-the-story/)
14. S Irudaya Rajan, "What is the future of migration from Kerala?", *Indian Express*, 27 April 2020, at: [An Expert Explains: What is the future of migration from Kerala? | Explained News,The Indian Express](https://www.indianexpress.com/article/india/what-is-the-future-of-migration-from-kerala-7111111)
15. Caroline Osella, "Malayali Migrant Women's Perceptions of the Gulf States", Middle East Institute, 2 February 2010, at: [Malayali Migrant Women's Perceptions of the Gulf States | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/malayali-migrant-women-s-perceptions-of-the-gulf-states)
16. Amrith Lal, "Malayalis in the Gulf are finally beginning to write about the land they live in", *Indian Express*, 18 February 2019, at: [Malayalis in the Gulf are finally beginning to write about the land they live in | Eye News,The Indian](https://www.indianexpress.com/article/india/malayalis-in-the-gulf-are-finally-beginning-to-write-about-the-land-they-live-in-7111111)

Express

17. Noor Naga, "Who Writes the Arabian Gulf?", *The Common*, 25 October 2021, at: [Who Writes the Arabian Gulf? | The Common \(thecommononline.org\)](https://thecommononline.org)
18. Nadeen Dakkak, "The Absent Voices of Second-Generation Migrants in Gulf States", *Migrant-Rights.org*, 27 June 2020, at: [The Absent Voices of Second-Generation Migrants in the Gulf States | Migrant-Rights.org](https://migrant-rights.org)
19. James Onley, "The Hindu Community in the Gulf: Creating Homes in the Diaspora", *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 5.2, December 2015, at: https://www.academia.edu/28116554/_The_Hindu_Community_in_Muscat_Creating_Homes_in_the_Diaspora_2015_?email_work_card=title
20. Jackie Armijo, "China and the Gulf: The Social and Cultural Implications of their Rapidly Developing Economic Ties," chapter in Tim Niblock and Monica Malik (Ed), *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century: The Local to Global Transformation*, (Berlin & London: Gerlach Press, 2013).

Draft of Workshop Agenda and Potential Topics for Papers

The workshop agenda will depend to a large extent on the papers which are presented, but the intention is to ensure that there is a good distribution of papers covering the diverse issues which have been outlined in the Abstract to this proposal. The following illustrative paper topics are intended to give some idea of what the workshop convenors are looking for:

- Challenges to *khaleeji* identity and sense of community fifty years after foreign migration to the Gulf
- Identity politics, community and multi-culturalism in the Gulf
- Identity issues faced by second-generation migrants in GCC states
- "Living together separately": interactions between Indian and Pakistani communities in GCC countries
- Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Nepalese, Filipino and other Asian communities in the Gulf: social and cultural activity and intercommunity interaction.
- Western technical and professional personnel in the Gulf: one community or many communities?
- Impact of long-term migration from Kerala on familial and social structures, norms and values
- Impact of women bread-earners in the Gulf on spouses' and children's understanding of gender-related social norms
- New approaches to protecting the interests of female domestic workers in GCC states
- Leading a Hindu religious and cultural life in GCC countries – opportunities and constraints
- The migrant experience in the Gulf as depicted in Arab/ Asian/ Indian literature
- Implications of improved relations between Gulf governments and the governments of labour-exporting countries on the daily lives of migrants in the Gulf region
- Malayali Muslims return home from Hijaz: novel expressions of conservative conduct and radical views
- Interactions of professional Arab migrants with Gulf citizens
- Depictions of migrants in GCC literature, visual arts and literature

Publication Plan

As with previous papers submitted to GRM workshops run by the same three Directors, the best of the papers will be published. For 2022, as for the last two GRMs, these would be published as a special issue in the Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

Acknowledgement

The Directors confirm that they will work within the guidelines for workshops, directors and publication issued by the GRM.