



Indian construction workers in Doha, Qatar

Arabian knights

Hit Malayali TV show Pravasalokam has done more for Indian immigrants in the Gulf than governments and law enforcement agencies put together. By Akshaya Pillai

IN FEBRUARY this year, Ali Habib was spading his newly acquired land in Safwa, Saudi Arabia, when he unearthed what he initially believed were remains of dead farm animals. Then, he spotted underwear, ropes and tags, followed by countless loops of duct tape. The dead were later identified as five Indians who were beaten and buried alive in March 2012. The ground was dug deeper, bones were assembled, residence cards were examined and one of the five was identified as Abubakkar, a Kerala native who left for Saudi Arabia in 2009 to work as a chauffeur.

In Kerala, where every family has at least one relative in the Gulf, it isn't surprising that Rafeeq Ravuther grew up listening to stories of men who never returned. But, when Ravuther's 26-year-old cousin committed suicide in Muscat, he knew he had to do something. In 2000, Ravuther approached his bosses in Kairali TV, a popular channel in Malayalam, to broadcast a show that could help families trace missing immigrants in the Gulf. Along with Anasudhin Azeez, Pravasalokam was launched as a dial-in programme. Today, it

has evolved into a full-fledged investigative reality show and become a helpline for immigrant grievances.

The editing cubicle on the fourth floor of Kairali TV can barely hold two chairs, but a third one is wedged in for me. One of the two monitors shows a woman in her mid-forties dabbing her cheeks with her sari. "When another relative went missing from Dubai after he was harassed and cheated into working in a cattle feed factory, we could do nothing to trace him for a long time," says Ravuther. "My brother, who is a journalist in the Gulf, couldn't help either. That's when it struck us: we needed a network of people." The show has representatives in many countries, including Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, UK, US and Yemen. Their phone numbers run in a scroll while the missing cases are telecast.

Bazira Gani's relatives had neither heard of Pravasalokam nor registered a grievance. Gani, a beautician and an illegal Pakistani immigrant in Ras al-Khaimah, in the UAE, was sent to prison when she couldn't pay her fine. That is when Ashraf Malliyekal, the

jailer's driver, chanced upon her and contacted the show. Malliyekal is one of the 19 representatives in the region. "We have a wide viewership among NRIs. As soon as an episode is aired, we're flooded with calls," says Ravuther. "The representatives follow up on these vague whereabouts. Drivers, salon workers and grocery shopkeepers are among the people who often claim to have seen the missing person in question. In the case of a woman named Maria, a couple of workshop workers helped us locate her." Maria, 37, who went to Saudi Arabia as a maid, was under house arrest for eight months with no salary. "I was made to work both shifts with just an hour's sleep and one meal. If I asked for my passport, they would ask me to pay 12,400 riyals [Rs 2 lakhs]. When I resisted, they stopped letting me call home and belted me till I agreed to work around the clock," Maria tells me later when we speak over the phone. I can hear her husband prodding her to describe the harassment, but she's crying too hard by now.

Out of 2000-plus cases, Pravasalokam has successfully solved 1200. A minimum of 25 distress calls are

More than **500** Indians have died while building stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Indians make up **22 per cent** of the migrant worker population in Qatar



Pravasalokam's producer Rafeeq Ravuther (left) and anchor PT Kunju Muhammed

Out of **2.8 million** Indian workers in Saudi Arabia, almost **1.4 million** don't have proper legal documents

registered each week. Film director and producer PT Kunju Muhammed is the face of the show and has been associated with it for 14 years. "It's a programme that has transformed me. I try my best to reach out to the viewers. I talk to the missing person as if he is out there, listening to me, watching his kid, who has probably grown beyond recognition since he left," says Muhammed. Govindan Gopalakrishnan would agree. Gopalakrishnan left for Bahrain in 1983. He led an invisible life for 19 years working on a camel farm, until he was arrested for being an illegal immigrant. When Pravasalokam tracked him down and brought him home, in 2006, his wife had already spent 23 years of her married life as a widow.

Ravuther blames the kafala (sponsorship) system, in which every migrant labourer in an Arab state is brought under a sponsor for a fixed tenure. The sponsor has autocratic power over his employee, which is invariably exploited, forcing several migrants to abscond. In 2009, the then Bahrain Labour Minister Dr Majeed Al Alawi had likened it to modern-day slavery. "Ninety-eight per cent of our cases are about illegal immigrants. Most are in hiding," says Ravuther. "Some don't even know they are being cheated by their sponsor. By the time they realise, the fine amount exceeds their decade-long income. Domestic helps, especially drivers, gardeners and maids are among the most vulnerable because there are no labour laws."

Bound together, the stories follow the same plotline. Just the order and length vary. As I get up to leave, Ravuther gets back to work and the woman on the monitor resumes crying. For the last eight months, she has been calling her son, only to hear that he has either switched off his phone or stopped using the number.