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## Indian migrant workers exploited and enslaved in Arab countries

*More than a million Indians live in the Gulf region. Often, employers take away their papers, including residency permits, forcing them to live as illegal aliens. Each year, thousands of migrants go missing. A Kerala TV station airs their cases and helps families find their loved ones.*  
Mumbai (AsiaNews/ Agencies) – More than a million Indians live and work in the Gulf region. Many of them are exploited or forced to live in slave-like condition, undocumented. According to a recent report by *Al-Jazeera*, thousands of migrant workers have gone missing after their visas expired. Often, employers take away their passports in order to force them to work underground without an opportunity to go home and with the constant danger of being arrested by police.

For the past 11 years, Rafeek Ravuther has directed and produced *Pravasi Lokam* or 'Migrants World', a weekly programme broadcast on *Kairali TV*, a Malayalam-language station based in Kerala, southern India. In it, he tells the story of the hardships Indian workers face in Arab countries. His programme also helps families find their missing relatives.

For millions of migrants from Kerala working in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Oman, *Pravasi Lokam* has become a must-see programme. Most of its protagonists are men, husband and sons who simply go missing.

Over the past 30 years, millions of Indian women have become "Gulf wives", left to raise their children on their own and entirely dependent on remittances from their overseas spouses.

When things go wrong, these women have nowhere to turn and no safety net to fall back on. Among the stories told one stands out, that of Govindan Gopalakrishnan who disappeared 23 years ago.

In 1983, Govindan left Kerala for Bahrain to work as a carpenter. Instead, when he arrived he was forced to work as a domestic servant. After two years he fled his Arab sponsor and ended up working on a camel farm deep in the desert of Bahrain. However, his original Arab sponsor filed charges against him and he eventually ended up in jail.

It was his second employer at the camel farm that got Gopalakrishnan out of jail and took him back to work. There he stayed for years, unable to contact his family on his meagre salary or send money home.

He toiled every day for 19 years, not knowing that he was undocumented for most of them. His second Arab sponsor at the camel farm refused to release him or allow him to visit his family. It was not until he was too old and frail, in his 60s, that his employer decided to let him go.

In 2006, the *Pravasi Lokam* team got in touch with his family. After negotiations with Bahraini authorities and with the help of Keralite community in Bahrain, US\$ 4,370 were raised to pay a fine for unpaid immigration fees. Now, friends and well-wishers are raising money to buy him a plane ticket to come home.

The programme has 17 representatives in the Gulf who can be contacted for help. Their phone numbers and contact details are scrolled across the screen as missing cases are reported.

The programme has aired more than 1,300 cases since it began, but has only been able to reunite around 320 families.



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