

Chasing a mirage

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Caption: Surviving on basic amenities: One of the better living quarters in the Gulf. Photo: AFP

In Benyamin's award-winning Malayalam novel **Aadu Jeevitham** (A Sheep-like Life), based on a true life story, the protagonist, Najeeb, is held as a slave labourer on a sheep farm in a faraway desert in Saudi Arabia. For three years, he is forced to do back-breaking work, is kept half-hungry and is denied water to wash. The farm's supervisor, who keeps Najeeb in control with a gun and binoculars, frequently beats him with a belt. One night, he escapes with his friend Hakeem and fumbles across the desert for days. Hakeem dies of thirst and fatigue, but Najeeb manages to find his way to a city where he gets himself arrested by the police in order to get deported. He spends several months in jail before being put on a plane to Kerala by the Saudi authorities.

The novel ends there. But, in real life, in spite of all the terrible things he had experienced before, Najeeb returns to Saudi Arabia to try his luck one more time.

“There are hundreds of Najeebs living sheep-like lives in Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries,” says P.T. Kunhi Mohammed, filmmaker and TV anchor who has lived and worked in Kuwait for 12 years. “Most of those who get cheated and exploited are those who lack job skills and have no valid documents.” Many landed there on temporary visas and stayed on illegally. This made them susceptible to exploitation.

There are roughly 2.5 million Keralites currently working in the Gulf, according to K.T. Balabhaskaran, CEO of Norka-Roots, a wing of Kerala Government's Non-Resident Keralites Affairs Department. A sizeable number of them are manual labourers and construction workers. Their wages are miserably low and living conditions are pathetic. He notes that a half of those leaving for the Gulf every year are unskilled. Abu Iringattiri, the Malayalam novelist and short-story writer who is in Saudi Arabia, points out that the monthly wage of a construction worker is Rs. 7000-10,000. “The wages are low, the working conditions are very poor and the working hours are long; still, Malayalis rush in here,” Mr. Iringattiri says.

The 'Gulf boom' started in Kerala in the 1970s. Millions of unemployed youth found jobs in the Gulf countries. Their remittances changed the social, economic and cultural contours of Kerala and turned the State into a 'money order economy.' For a long time, a 'Gulf visa' was the most sought-after dowry. And, psychiatrists even coined a term 'Gulf wife syndrome' to refer to the depression in women long separated from their Gulf husbands. While the State's economy remained almost stagnant without much industrial development, the overseas remittances helped the 'Kerala model of development' going.

Decreasing incentives

Over the years, the wages in West Asia, in real terms, have dwindled and for many manual jobs the wages are on a par with those back home. Still, the economic migration to West Asia goes on. Thousands of people get cheated by unauthorised recruiters and middlemen. Since a job visa depends on a 'sponsor', the Gulf worker is always at the mercy of the sponsor. Those who go with a visit visa and then 'go missing', cannot hope for decent treatment or prompt payment of wages from their employers, many Gulf workers say.

M.K. Harish of Malappuram was recruited as cafeteria assistant for a Kuwait company by a Kerala agent way back in 2006. But, instead of Kuwait, he was taken to Iraq and was put in a factory on the Iran-Iraq border. The fortified factory, he later learnt, sent cooked food to American soldiers in Iraq. He had to work two shifts everyday and there was only a half-day off on Friday. His passport was kept by the sponsor. He had no access to a phone and all the 16 months he had worked there he could never step out of the factory premises. The sponsor paid him his wages regularly but it was almost one-fourth of what was promised. "Luckily for me, I fell seriously ill and they sent me back home," Mr. Harish recalled.

"Women manual workers, especially housemaids, are the worst exploited Gulf workers," says Shiny Jokos, a mediaperson who worked in the Gulf for more than five years. She interviewed several housemaids who had been exploited, battered or sexually abused by their employers. Ms. Jokos says that Tamil and Telugu housemaids faced worse harassment as they were relatively uneducated and would not know how to get help. "Many poor women recruited as housemaids end up in sex rackets, many of which are run by Indians."

Mr. Balabhaskaran noted that the Indian government has banned recruiting women below age 30 as overseas housemaids. To beat the age bar, young

women are now being recruited as home nurses or beauticians. They often ended up as bonded labourers or were trapped by sex rackets.

Still, despite all the risks, Najeebs continue to borrow money or pawn the family jewels to get to the Arabian sands.

In search of missing Malayalis...

A unique TV show helps trace Keralites missing abroad...

An old, ailing mother, sitting in a television studio at Thiruvananthapuram, goes on air letting the world know that her middle-aged daughter is missing in Saudi Arabia. Naseema, poor and divorced, had left for Saudi Arabia 12 years back to work as a housemaid, leaving her two children in her mother's custody. She used to send money until two years before, but never visited home in the past 12 years. And, for two years, there has been no word from her. Apparently, someone else is in control of her life.

The old woman, amid sobs, says she just wants to see her daughter for once before she dies and hand back the children. "Could anyone help me find my daughter?"

The anchor of the TV programme — filmmaker and former MLA P.T. Kunhi Mohammed — steps in and asks the Keralite viewers in the Gulf region to help trace Naseema. The television screen scrolls the phone numbers of the programme's representatives in the Gulf countries so that anyone having any information about Naseema could call. Then Mr. Kunhi Mohammed makes a direct request to Naseema (in case she happens to watch the programme): "Please let us know if you are alive. If you are in trouble we can help you out. If you have lost your passport, we can help you get a new one and we can also get you an air ticket to return home."

It's "Pravasa Lokam" (Malayalam for "World of Expatriates") on Kairali TV, a channel floated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). It is a unique weekly programme that helps trace Keralites missing while working abroad, mainly in the Gulf countries. The hugely popular programme is telecast at 11.00 p.m. every Thursday to catch the attention of Non-Resident Keralites (NRK) in the Gulf where Friday is the weekly holiday.

Pravasa Lokam began as a phone-in programme in 2000, and has evolved over the years. It brings the missing person's relatives to the studio and lets them air their feelings. The photos and all available information about the person are

telecast which are picked up by the scores of Keralite organisations in the Gulf. They voluntarily look out for the missing person, who very often has no money or travel papers to visit home, or is held captive in a labour camp or on farm by his employer/sponsor. He could also be in jail or is plainly unwilling to return for a variety of reasons such as unpaid loans.

“In the past 11 years, we have been able to trace hundreds of missing people and reunite them with their families,” says Rafeeq Ravuther, Pravasa Lokam’s producer. Every week, the programme gets 10-20 requests, but only two can be aired in an episode. Scores of people write in to seek help to get them out of foreign jails, labour camps or sex rackets. Complaints of unpaid wages are galore.

Mr. Ravuther feels it is the force of the personality of Mr. Kunhi Mohammed, which is the life of the programme. “My own experience of working in the Gulf for 12 years and my public life helped me a lot in smoothly interacting with these grieving people,” Mr. Kunhi Mohammed says. “Anchoring the programme for 11 years has drastically changed my views about life and people.”

With the help of philanthropic viewers, the programme is also paying for the education of many missing persons’ children, including those of a housemaid who was later found to have been dead for years in a Gulf country.

Pravasa Lokam is now expanding its role to cover Singapore, Malayasia, the U.S., Britain and everywhere where the Keralite goes to find a job.