

Lifting the Veil



For the past 12 years, Rafeek Ravuther has been turning the spotlight on the ordeals of Indians from Kerala, who have gone to the Gulf in the hope of making a good living, but ended up instead in sordid jails, missing or even committing suicide. On his weekly program, titled Pravasi Lokam or “Migrants World,” on Kairali TV, a Malayalam-language network based in Kerala, he unwraps the scabs of Indian workers in Arab countries and sometimes helps families find their missing relatives.

What motivated you to produce Pravasī Lokam, (Migrant World)?

One of my cousin who had been to Muscat in Oman committed suicide, because of suffering and harassment at the hands of the authorities within days of landing in that country. After landing in Muscat my cousin, who was an engineer, realized that he was duped by the travel agent. Another relative who was working in a cattle feed factory ran away from his worksite because of harassment. We somehow managed to trace him with the help of

some journalists in Emirates. I realized that there were thousands of people who were being duped and were facing harassment. I wanted to create awareness about the stark realities of the Arab world.

What has been the response?

The response has been very encouraging. The popularity can be gauged by the fact that the program has aired more than 1,300 cases since it began and we have been able to reunite more than 300 families. Because of its large viewership, this program has become one of the most popular programs among our four channels, which is avidly watched not only by the Gulf Malayalees but also their close acquaintances.... In many cases we get clues about the missing persons within minutes of airing the program. The show has become popular with the millions of Keralite migrants living in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE and Oman.

How serious is the exploitation of Indian workers in the Arab countries?

Exploitation is enormous. Most of those who suffer are labor class people with little education and contacts. Some of them have been languishing in prisons for years together because the employers have filed trumped up charges against them. Every year thousands of Indians go missing in the Gulf countries.

Poor and middle class Indians often go to the gulf countries in search of pot of gold. How do they become slaves?

Many have been duped by their agents and have no way of returning because their passports are being taken away either by their employers or by the recruiting agents. Without passports they are fully at the mercy of their employers who subject them to physical and mental abuse.

What is the condition of the Indian women in the Gulf countries? How serious is their exploitation.

Their condition is equally pitiable. In fact they are the worst sufferers as they are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than men. There have been many suicides among housemaids. These hardly get reported in the media there and neither is there outrage nor remorse.

How accessible is the criminal justice system to Indian migrant workers?

The law there is one sided. It favors the Arabs. The sponsorship visas is mostly misused. One can only work for the employer who brings an immigrant into the country. If one wants to seek a job elsewhere in the host country, he has to leave the country and return on a different visa. This gives ample scope for the sponsor to misuse.

What are the Ministry of Overseas Affairs and the Kerala government doing about it?

It is a pity that neither the central nor the state government are doing anything tangible to tackle this issue seriously. Everyone is only giving lip service.