

South Asian Labourers and Non-Citizenry Aspects of Popular Politics in the Gulf

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News

For the last one decade, the strikes and open demonstrations of South Asian labourers have become a common feature of politics in the Arab states of the Gulf. The region at present is otherwise an arena of Arab Spring-induced open popular political expressions. There are ample indications of the assertiveness of many hitherto side-lined social actors like women and minorities over the issues of gender and social and political status. But the politics of South Asian labourers stands apart with very little to do with the political and social status. It rather aims at economic rights and dignified life in the hosting countries. This work, taking cues from the experience of South Asian labour unrests for last ten years, examines the political content of non-citizenry popular politics in the GCC States.

Key Words

Popular Politics in the GCC States, South Asian Labourers, Transnational Indian Politics, Labour Unrests, Politics of Rights

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Note

Some parts of this work have already been published in two earlier works of the author. See M.H.Ilias, *Malayalee Migrants and Translocal Kerala Politics in the Gulf: Re-conceptualizing 'political', Contextualizing the Modern Middle Eastern Diaspora*, Anthony Gorman & Sossie Kasbarian (ed.), Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 303-337.

Analysis:**Introduction**

One way or another, politics of non-citizen labourers has become the subject of intense debate in the Arab side of the Gulf today. Frequent unrests of South Asian labourers in the UAE and Bahrain appear to be an indicator of politics of that sort gaining momentum. What is more significant is the way in which these protests are organized; it was previously unimaginable in a place where labour unions remain illegal and protests of any sort can end in termination and immediate deportation.¹

Unlike the region-wide Arab Spring-induced popular protests in the region, the politics of immigrant labourers have been not necessarily about equal political rights as the aim of protestors not in any way is the recognition as full citizens by the state. Fully aware of peculiar social and political status, the migrant workers seek no citizenship rights and what figures in their demands, is economic rights and a dignified life in the hosting countries. The political imagination in such cases is limited by the matters of legality and legal protection of labour.² The protests demonstrations staged by them were not necessarily against the rulers or the system of ruling, but in most cases, point to the inherent anomalies in the system which can't be solved through the means of political reforms.

These uprisings, therefore, do not make much of political resonance in the host society's politics nor do gain any recognition by the other groups engaged in politics of various sorts. Often pitched against the employment providers, the state cannot fully comprehend the political content of such demonstrations. The limited recognition of the rights of foreign labourers and the narrowly defined non-citizen rights often become more profound with the governments' effort to institutionalize it with complex sponsorship legislation, unequal compensation structure, selective nationalization of work force and controlled access to opportunity for non-nationals.

The politics among Indian migrants, based mainly on the discriminatory practices, takes various forms; informal gathering with political undertones on specific occasions and not-so open demonstrations and campaigns operating clandestinely. Strangely enough, most of these political expressions are not formal or apparent and, therefore, do not invite unfriendly and intolerant reactions from host states. The labour unrest of 2008 in Dubai in which Indian migrants had a greater role to play was the only exception, wherein the authorities noticed the content and assertiveness of expatriate politics.

¹ M.H.Ilias, *South Asian Labour Crisis in Dubai and the Scanty Prospects of Indian Policy in the Arab Gulf Region*, Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations, Vol.4, No. 1& 2, 2011, 74-102.

² Ahamed Kanna, "A Politics of non-recognition? Biopolitics of Arab Gulf Worker Protests in the Year of Uprising", *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*, vol. 4(1), 146-164, May 2012.

Massive open demonstrations were taken by surprise by the regime in the UAE. This was particularly significant, when it happened in a country, where all sorts of political organisations remain illegal and evidence of political associations of any sort can end up in imprisonment or immediate deportation for activists.

This work examines how the idea of popular politics is flourished among a marginalized section of South Asian labourers in the Gulf through a set of subtle informal expressions. Taking cues from the experience of Indian labourers in the Gulf, this paper seeks to provide accounts of non-citizenry aspects of popular politics apparently manifested in the frequent labour strikes. As happens all over the region, popular politics of expatriate labourers revolves around the ideas and practices of rights rather than around political power which in the case of Gulf States is inaccessible for immigrant population. The ways in which values and practices of dissent and democracy become entrenched in popular politics and thereby in the political imagination of non-citizen labourers in a subtle manner are to be examined analyzing the experience of protest movements of South Asian labourers.

Politics of Translocality

There are many ways to understand the specific political context in which the popular politics of non-citizen workers of South Asia in the Gulf emerged. The nature of immigration, living conditions, work cultures and the relationship between the labourers and employers and discriminatory practices of the state institutions-all have contributed to the making of this.

As outsiders, migrant labourers in the Gulf live in a state of legal and political ambiguity and the lack of involvement in the host country's political and social processes drives them to seek shelter within the politics of their homeland. This lack of political involvement in the case of South Asian expatriates contributes to the process of producing India-centric political consciousness and affinities. What seems to be happening is not simply the extension of political discourse beyond the boundaries, but this extension offers an avenue of subtle expression for the otherwise politically 'silenced' South Asian expatriates.

Although it is placed mostly within an imaginative setting, translocal South Asian politics significantly touches upon the issue of identity. The expatriate labourers from the region look to this re-fashioned politics to give themselves a coherent identity and a 'national' narrative in order to compensate for the lack of political space in the receiving countries' politics. The increasingly observable collective identity formation and diasporic political consciousness primarily reflect a response to the inhospitable climate and the social discrimination being faced by the South Asian labourers in the Gulf states. Several studies on the evolution of translocal political structures among the Indian migrants argue that their form generally takes root in the struggles for civil rights

in the host land.³ In most of the cases, this refashioned identity may not directly address alienation from the host states' political process, but it creates new forms of politics whose dynamics have, under translocality, brought forth a diverse set of popular political practices in the Gulf.

As has been discussed earlier, the expatriate workers in the GCC Countries are the flashpoint of a series of uncertainties that mediate between everyday life and its fast shifting socio-political backdrop. They are represented by multiple crisscrossing divides and boundaries that give separate ethnicities their own national identification in the region.⁴ The harsh experience of migration and relocation always shapes a new national awareness of self and this awareness, under favorable conditions, can be riveting and transformative. This national awareness along with linkages with home country's politics eventually metamorphoses into specialized polities within the host countries.⁵ With concern over the issues happening in both the host countries and homeland this kind of informal politics is deemed to be private, existing outside the formal institutions, thus allowing one to create important forms of popular politics. They take many different forms and states in the Arab Gulf never fully containing the everyday experience of such spaces.

Understanding various forms of informal associations and networks existing with minimum encounters with the political and social institutions of the host countries constitutes a major means to study the nature and evolution of popular politics flourished among the South Asian immigrant labourers. As discussed earlier, this popular politics is, actually, a product of a particular political situation and the informal nature does not permit it to gather tangible institutional form. With complete departure from clear institutionally protected relations, this popular politics often tends to remain either as covertly operated political associations or as formal social, cultural or community organisations with unrevealed and subtle political agendas. While some of the community organizations are politically neutral, others enjoy the backing of major political parties in India like the Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM) and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML).

The perceptions of South Asian expatriates in the Gulf States are generally, influenced by a sense of alienation, which is deeply rooted in their relationships with the nationals. The informal political networks stress on this alienation which results ultimately in a

³ Nisha Mathew, 'Between Malabar and the Gulf: History, Culture and Identity in the Making of the Transnational Malayalee Public Sphere', Unpublished Paper, 2011.

⁴ Sulayman Khalaf, "The Evolution of City Type, Oil and Globalization", in J. Fox, et al. (eds.), *Globalization and the Gulf*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp.244-266.

⁵ The distinction between citizen and immigrant is integral to these specialised polities. See Paul Dresch, 'Foreign Matter: The Place of Strangers in Gulf Society', in J. Fox, et al. (eds.), *Globalization and the Gulf*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp.200-223.

form of ‘imagined politics’ that offers an escape from the political realities in the host country. The feeling of cultural suspicion is another issue being faced by the South Asian expatriates.⁶ Nationals in many of the Gulf states clearly began to see the large South Asian workforce as a threat to the cultural identity of their nation.⁷

Although the cultural national identity debates in the GCC countries have generally been revolved around prominent ‘others’-mainly ethnic and religious minorities like Shias-the increasing cultural influence of South Asian expatriates become a source of acute socio-economic concerns.⁸ The new demographic composition has generated a great deal of debate over the huge presence of South Asian workers, whose population outnumbers locals in some of the Gulf States. Making up ninety percent of the total work force⁹, they constitute nearly four to one in every Gulf Society. The GCC authorities have changed the way they look at the overwhelming presence of the Indian expatriates.

Non-Citizenry Aspects

Relations among nationals and expatriates in the GCC states are affected by specific laws and conditions that relegate most migrant groups to subordination. In an ‘ethnocratic’¹⁰ set up, citizens enjoy certain amount of privilege, and the distinctive identity of citizen is protected in sometimes unusual ways. “The exclusion of foreign workers” according to Longva “may entirely be in line with the widely-accepted principle that political rights are a function of national citizenship.”¹¹ Non-citizens, especially the South Asian expatriates, despite their wealth and economic influence, find themselves at the bottom of the social structure.¹²

⁶ Due to the particular nature of their job (domestic workers, house drivers, care givers, school teachers and baby sitters) and greater access to women and children in the Gulf Societies, nationals in most of the Gulf countries see South Asians as a group with a potential to alter the local culture. This has been shared by many nationals during my field visits in 2010.

⁷ This worry was echoed in the GCC’s meeting held in Doha in 2008 in which participants openly shared their uneasiness and warned about the possible repercussions. See Gulf News, 29 November, 2008.

⁸ Niel Patrick, “*Nationalism in the Gulf States*”, Kuwait Programme on Development and Globalization in the Gulf States, 2009, no. 3.

⁹ www.news.bbc.uk/2/hi/middle-east/7266610.stm.

¹⁰ The privileged status of ‘national’ is sharper and conceived sometimes in tribal or genealogical terms. Natives’ work is rewarded with disproportionately high compensation. The presence of non-GCC workers and their inferior legal social and political subjection to the GCC citizens, leads to a sort of ‘ethnocracy’. See Ang N. Longva, “Neither Autocracy or Democracy but Ethnocracy: Citizens, Expatriates and the Socio-Political Systems in Kuwait”, in P. Dresch and J. Piscatori (eds.), *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, London: IB Tauris, 2005, pp.114-36.

¹¹ Ang N. Longva, *Wells Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait*, Boulder: West View Press, 1997, p.118.

¹² Situation may be slightly different in the UAE and Dubai in particular, where the elites among the immigrant population, to some extent, are considered alternate or unofficial citizens.

The informal nature of politics of South Asian labourers does not permit to gather tangible institutional form. Majority of their actions do not remain strictly inside the state and their ‘legally ambiguous’ position does not put pressure on the state to act against them. Operating from within the permissible legal boundaries, their activities also never pose any real threat to the state or exacerbate worries about national political coherence. Their operative styles also are not ways that would attract widespread tensions in the host society.

A closer look at the context of origin of the politics among the South Asian expatriates reveals that the content of such a politics remains limited to seeking minor changes in the polity. Serious reforms within the existing system or an immediate end to the regime through revolution are nowhere in the agenda of this politics. The political imagination is often limited by the matters of legality and economic rights. Recently, there has been a dramatic rise in support for such informal movements that present themselves as the promoters of the rights of under-privileged expatriates. This development is very significant in the absence of organized political forces to aspire the demands of such sections.

The Arab Spring induced political uprisings of citizens is more political oriented while those of non-citizen workers appear to be more oriented towards rights. Keeping awareness about the peculiar social and political status, the migrant workers seek no citizenship rights or equal access to the resource of the state. The uprisings of non-citizen labourers, according to Kanna, “seem to want, at most, a *limited* recognition by the state, the recognition that they are *not* citizens.”¹³

Most significantly, the recent cases of labour unrest have brought into focus not just the inherent hostile relationships between the non-citizen workers and the employment providers but the limitations of legal system to protect the rights of non-citizen workers fully in the context of burgeoning exploitation. This is very significant in the context that the civil society movements in the Gulf, which are mostly patronized by the government¹⁴ and with its elite social content are restricted to a small section of politically equipped citizens, never represent a site of negotiation for the non-citizen labourers or a possibility opened by the activities of them.

¹³ Kanna, “A Politics of non-recognition? Biopolitics of Arab Gulf Worker Protests in the Year of Uprising”

¹⁴ Jill Crystal, “Public order and Authority: Policing Kuwait”, in James Piscatori and Paul Dresch, *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2005.