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Cheated, exploited and trapped: Untold stories of Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia

There are still others that are not only denied salaries, but also food and water

Geetika Mantri (/author-articles/Geetika-Mantri) | Wednesday, May 11, 2016 - 09:18

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25-year-old Asima Khatoon went to Riyadh about five months ago, with promises of better work which would enable her to financially support her family. Nine days ago, her mother Ghousia Khatoon was informed of her daughter's death in the Gulf country.

Since then, Ghousia has been trying to get her body back to India.

Asima was one of the many workers who aspire to go to the Gulf countries in search of better work opportunities but instead are grossly abused by employers. Hers is one of the few stories that highlight the trauma that many migrant workers face in the Gulf countries.

and trapped: Untold stories of Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia

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"I went to work as a welder. But when I got there, they took my passport and made me work as a construction labourer. Once when I tried to call my parents, they snatched my phone and kept it with them 5 days," says Ritesh Kumar Sharma, who went to Saudi Arabia in December 2012. Despite the fact that his agreement was for two years, he was able to return only on April 6 this year.

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"I had to beg for food in Saudi Arabia," says Mohammad Yusuf, another migrant worker who was able to return in 20 days.

Yusuf speaks conversational English and says that he was promised a salesperson's job by his agent. However, when he went there, he too was made to work as a labourer. When he tried to contact the agent who sent him there, there was no response.

Irudaya Rajan, a professor working at the Center for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, explains that while the government has recruiting agents who are registered, there are those who operate illegally. However, there is a connection between the two –

"The problem is, any [registered] agent will have to look at locals to get people to fulfill the demands of the employers as he does not know everyone. Hence, these uncertified agents operate."

The problem is not merely the illegal agents who make false promises and take no guarantee for the treatment meted out to the workers at the hands of the employers.

“Even workers who go through registered recruiting agents can face exploitation and abuse,” says Himanshi Matta, Media Officer, Amnesty International India.

Sana, a 28-year-old girl from Mumbai, went to Saudi Arabia in October 2015 through an agent known in their community. She was promised the job of a house nurse. However, she realized that the Arab man who had promised to “keep her like a daughter” did not have any intentions of doing so.

“She calls me and she cries. They [her employers] are torturing her with domestic grunt work; they don’t even give her food,” narrates her mother (name withheld on Sana’s request).

She has been running from pillar to post for months now to get her daughter back. “I have tried everything. We have written to Sushma Swaraj also. Someone told us to write to Modi. We have gone to government offices in Mumbai. Nobody has replied. Every second day we go to the agent also to get him to talk to her owner.”

She explains that the owner refuses to send her back because he has already paid to get her to the country. When he demands his money back, the agent says that he has used it to buy her tickets to Saudi Arabia. In the tussle, her daughter’s nightmare continues in the foreign country.

Sana and her mother are in touch with Kundan Srivastava, a human rights activist working on cases of migrant workers wanting to return back home.

“It’s the fault of our people too. Fraudulent agents tell Saudi employers that they can treat our workers however they want because there’s nothing protecting the poor man here,” he argues.

Srivastava maintains that while he knows the false promises made in such cases all too well, he is hopeful in Sana’s case.

However, there are those, whose voices succumb to the whims of these “owners” as these workers call their employers, before they are heard. Among those is the case of 22-year-old Rajesh Kumar.

Rajesh went to Saudi to work as a mechanic. While he got to keep the profession of his choice, his employer would make him labour for long hours.

“He was there for eight months. One day his employer kept pressuring him but he didn’t feel like working. So he went to his room. Angered by his defiance, he [employer] went there and they had an argument. He hit Rajesh’s head with a rod,” recounts Lalit, Rajesh’s cousin from Bihar.

He narrates that Rajesh fell unconscious and upon being taken to the hospital, had to undergo surgery. A week later, Rajesh’s family was told that he had slipped into coma. Three days after that on February 4, 2016, they were informed about his death. The family has been trying to get back his body ever since.

“Every week they tell us it will be the next; they say it’s because it is a murder case. He [Rajesh] had taken a loan of 1.5 lakh to go there. He didn’t want to come back without repaying it.” Lalit’s voice quavers with emotion as he says this.

Some workers try to approach the Indian embassy in hopes of redressal but to no avail. “The Indian embassy has no teeth there. There are many workers from other countries also but no one treats them badly,” says Ritesh.

This institutional apathy towards the migrant workers’ security, results in them becoming even more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. To that end, Himanshi says that the government must ensure human rights of their workers even outside the borders.

“The government must draft a new emigration law in line with international human rights standards to protect the rights of Indian migrant workers,” she suggests.

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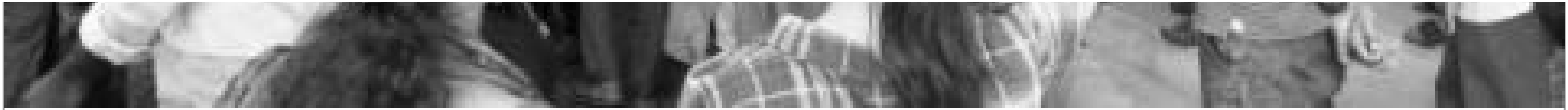




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