

## Horrifying Conditions of Indian Migrant Workers in West Asia

**Around** 8 million Indians live in the Gulf region. Many of these workers are leaving behind impoverished lives and migrating to the Gulf countries to earn more and send the savings to their homes to rescue their families from abject poverty.

While each unskilled worker migrating to Saudi Arabia spend around Rs. 75,000 to migrate there skilled workers like nurses are spending about Rs 3 lakh at each the time of their recruitment. With a hope of earning much either they were selling whatever small property are obtaining loans from the local usurers at exorbitant interest rates.

But on reaching to those gulf countries they are forced to surrender their passports to their local employers, making them vulnerable and helpless. In those Gulf countries they are not only victims of forced labour, but also they are brutally ill-treated by their employers. Due to their vulnerable and helpless condition in a new unknown country very often are not in a position to assert their rights.

In September 2015, a video-emerged online which showed the abuse of an Indian construction worker by his Saudi supervisor.

In October 2015, a woman worker Kasturi from Tamil Nadu working as a house-maid reported that her right-hand was chopped off by her Saudi employer.

Again recently in December 2015, three workers from Kerala are abused in Saudi Arabia. They paid an agent to get them employment in Yemen. But they were taken to Saudi Arabia instead. They were trained electricians, but were made to work in a brick factory. They were beaten by their employer with a wooden plank for refusing to do the work, the torture captured on Camera and sent home to their families.

There are not a few such stories of entrapment, deceit and abuse of Indian workers in Gulf countries. There were many stories of sexual abuse of women Indian workers, and there are many Indian workers languishing in the jails of those countries, who were implicated in to false cases.

According to the External Affairs Minister of India Ms.Sushma Swaraj, there are 7, 4000 complaints of exploitation from Indian workers from Gulf countries, in 2015 alone. It is unknown how much number of cases are not at all complained. There have been 2, 472 complaints from Saudi Arabia, 3,236 complaints from Kuwait, fallowed 806 in Bahrain, 413 in Oman, 378 in Qatar and 126 in U.A.E in the year 2015. Many such sordid tales of harassment and torture of Indian workers could have gone unreported.

The Indian authorities boast about their safe condition or improved condition of forex balances as if it is the result of their clever monetary management financial policies and their rule. They even conduct "NRI DIVAS" celebrations each year on grand scale by felicitating some selected elite NRI's as show-pieces.

However the real NRI's are not those who are being projected by the authorities and being honoured by the respective governments. In fact it is the Indian migrant workers in West Asia are the real N.R.I's. It is their remittances to India that have been keeping the position of Forex balances in a safe condition. In 2014 the money repatriated to India from the Gulf countries is \$ 32.7 billion, whereas the remittances from U.S. is only \$ 10 billion. Thus the migrant workers in West Asia prove to be India's real NRIs.

But despite India having MOUs with 6 Gulf countries, has not ensured any measures for protection and welfare of the Indian workers in those countries. Only certain lip-service and eye washing announcements are being made from time to time as if these concerns are being considered.

Many workers are losing lives in those countries as orphans. Many hundreds of workers are languishing in jails in those countries.

But our government takes no initiative either to bring back the dead bodies or to arrange for the release of incarcerated workers.

Only NGOs and philanthropic associations help those unfortunate workers.

Such is the plight of Indian workers, who earn the major Forex for India in Gulf countries.

### **The Plight of Migrant Workers from Odisha in Brick Kilns on AP & TS**

There are about 30,000 brick-kilns in Telengana and Andhra Pradesh. In each brick-kiln between 15 and 20 families from Odisha state are working.

Failing agriculture and shrinking forests, destroyed the traditional lively-hoods of the people of the Western Odisha, especially the districts Kalahandi, Koraput and Balangir, where people are left with no alternative are forced to migrate to other states and to take up hazardous jobs in unsafe brick-kilns in A.P and T.S.

Every year in between October and June, around 2,00,000 people from those districts of Odisha to A.P, contracted by local labour contractors called 'Sirdars' go to brick-kilns for working. Small and marginal farmers are a part of these migrants, who are the victims of the agrarian crises.

These workers are treated brutally by the employers, abusing them in many forms.

Last January, the labour contractors of these brick-kilns had chopped off the hands of two workers.

On December 3 (2015), a pregnant woman worker for not reporting to work due to fever was beaten to death by the employer.

There are many such incidents of brutality against migrant brick-kiln workers became a commonality in these brick-kilns.

The families of these migrant workers have to survive on broken-rice and are forced to work for 16 to 18-hours a day. They are made to live in small huts having no access to clean water and medical care.

Though the minimum wage act makes it mandatory to pay Rs 420/- per 1,000 bricks, workers are paid only with Rs 180 to Rs 250. But they are forced (each worker) to produce a target of three lakh bricks for the reason.

Every year from 50 to 70 cases of sexual harassment and deaths are being reported in these brick-kilns.

Children too are forced to work. Children as young as six years are woken up at 3.30 AM and forced to work till 9 AM, and again they are pressed in to service from 3.00 PM onwards. Brick-kiln owners do not fix specific wages for children.

They are tied to the brick-kiln industry as bonded labour.

Neither the inter-state-Migration Act, nor Bonded Labour Abolition Act nor any labour act comes to the rescue of these bonded labourers, since the authorities and rulers are hand in gloves with the brick-kiln owners, and our system is indifferent to the woes of toiling masses.

### **The Woes of the Inter-State Migrant Workers**

With the agrarian crises created by our rulers through their implementation of Capitalist neo-liberal economic policies, the life of the people in rural India is totally destroyed. Added to this woe drought conditions are playing havoc with the lives of the people in rural areas. Total neglect of agricultural infrastructural arrangements is taking toll of the people's lives.

Lack of lively-hoods and no alternatives the people of rural areas are forced to migrate to other states seeking jobs. Though most of them are the skilled workers in the agricultural sector, they are forced to take up unskilled, manual, hard and hazardous jobs as daily labourers. Most of them are ending in to the feudal servitude of bonded labour. Presently in addition to the more traditional form of bondage-where the debt is passed on from one generation to the next with the worker being confined perpetually to the land lord's home with no wages/new forms of bondage have emerged. In the agrarian sector the labour is now bound by a high-interest debt bond to the land lord. This bonded labour system has spread beyond agriculture and prevalent in brick-kilns, agarabatti units, stone quarries, mines, the construction industry, looms and in homes as domestic labour in the heart of cities.

From the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telanganapeople from rural areas are migrating to other states seeking

lively-hood. Most of these migrants are landless and more than 90 percent of them belonged to oppressed castes.

Often these migrant labourers are procured through 'Sardars' (labour contractors) from distant places after paying an "advance" or promising a lump sum at the end of certain period of work. Once they enter the work-place they are often physically confined, forced to work up to 18 hrs a day, subjected to physical abuse, and even the women labourers are subjected to sexual abuses and atrocities.

Though there are abundant laws to arrest such atrocities, bonded labour system etc. the concerned authorities, with the connivance of the feudal forces who wield power and authority in rural areas, never attempt to implement the laws. The governments show an utmost indifference to the plight of these bonded labours and migrant workers.

Their apathy towards this scourge of bonded labour system is criminal.

No doubt some times, certain show-piece operations of rescue of 'bonded labour' are conducted by the authorities, when some incidents are reported glaringly in the media. However due to the failure or lack of any rehabilitation programmes for bonded labourers from the state, the conditions of those 'rescued' bonded labourers are becoming more worse.

For example, when the Karnataka Rajya Raithu Sangha in 2013 had unearthed the case of five labourers we made to work throughout the day, enchained in shackles in a quarry in Hangarahalli, near Srirangapatna, the authorities 'rescued' the reported bonded labour including their children. But when British author Patrick French went looking after the victims of this much publicised case to his surprise he found them begging near a village temple. He recounted this experience in his book: "**India: A Portrait**".

#### **Hand-loom Weavers Confined as Bonded-slaves :**

Many handloom-workers from Anantapoor, Kadapa and Chittor districts are being confined by the factory owners, who hired them after paying some advance, in the factory-sheds. This advance amount will be deducted from the wages/commission paid to them for the work rendered by them. These workers are not allowed to go beyond the 'sheds'. These 'shed labourers' are paid with the paltry wage of Rs 100/- to Rs. 150/- per day. They are forced to work on the entire day. Even in some 'factories' the entire families are made to work on hand-looms. If these labourers attempt to go out, they will be attacked physically.

Tens of such 'shed' factories are existing in Anantapoor district of A.P. But the authorities do not take any action against these criminal managements of these factories.

In each shed factory, the workers have to weave *saries* on the hand-looms numbering from 100-200. The workers and their families have to live within these factories.

If at all the authorities attempt to inspect these factories, the news reaches the managements about the intending inspection and on those days these 'shed factories' are closed without leaving any clue.

Now hundreds of hand-loom workers are thus confined in these 'shed factories' having no chances of their liberation, from the bonded labour system.

#### **The Plight of Agricultural Labourers of A.P. in Other States**

From the drought areas of Rayalaseema, in A.P, lacking no alternative many agricultural labourers and marginal farmers have migrated to Kerala and Karnataka to find out some lively-hood or other.

Recently glaring reports of the pitiable conditions in which these migrated labourers from A.P. are languishing in Kochi and Bangalore begging and working as sewage cleaners but still not finding sufficient means for sustenance. Particularly the plight of agricultural labourers migrated from the 52 villages from Kadiri division of Anantapoor district is disheartening.

When this news about their pitiable conditions is published in media, the A.P. government played a great drama of sending government official teams to examine the conditions of those migrated labourers to Kochi and Karnataka and to arrange for a comprehensive study of the facts that lay behind massive migrations and to find a solution to the problem. But even after 3 months nothing concretely is done to alleviate the pitiable condition of these migrated labourers.

### **Migrant Workers of A.P. Confined in Odisha :**

On the last day of November (2015), a case of confinement of migrant workers from A.P., in Odisha is reported in media.

Family members of five migrant workers from Balla village of Ramakuppam mandal, were confined their employer at Bhubaneswar in Odisha for a week.

These workers have been working for the last 8 years, coming home twice a year. They are engaged in massive electrical works such as repairs of transformers and industrial motors.

Six months ago, the workers sought their owner to relieve them so that they could settle at their native state. After this the workers were not paid their wages running in to over Rs 8 lakh.

Last week (in Nov.15) following an argument between the workers and the employer, the five were confined in a room and they were subjected to manhandling. One of the workers managed to send message to his family members informing about their fate. But these five workers could not be contacted by their relatives over the phone.

So they approached the police in A.P., to secure the release of their confined workers.

### **Children as Bonded Labourers**

Many instances of children working as bonded labourers has been reported this year, throughout India. This scourge of child-labourers mainly as bonded labour continues forcing the families of backward sections of people to send their children for employment in bonded labour conditions.

The authorities in Hyderabad on several instances found trafficked children in several hundred numbers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal slog for hours in dingy bangle making and embroidery shops besides in bag making, gold ornaments polishing workshops. The children are made to work in surroundings unsafe for human-beings. They are forced to work for long hour and are under-paid.

An NGO association "save the children" had released a report disclosed that 8,000 children are working in garment factories in different parts of the National capital. It also revealed the fact that significantly high numbers of children are engaged in house-hold level work. It also revealed the 13 percent children are working in 'addas', household based units where unrelated adults and children work together.

In August (2015) 52 children under forced labour conditions in a bore-well unit in Chennai were found by the authorities. These children were from Chhattisgarh and Odisha. These children were lured in to the trap, with an initial advance of Rs 1,000 and a promised monthly salary of Rs 4,000/-. But their salary was never paid.

Several children have been 'rescued' by the authorities from bonded or forced labour from Namakkal, Salem & Dharmapuri of Tamilnadu. Many minor girls from Chhattisgarh were forced in to construction work in Bangalore.

In the textile (spinning mills) industry in Tamilnadu, from which many global brands source their products, tens of thousands of child and teenage workers are locked in custodial hostels and are compelled to toil almost without a break in conditions of bondage for 10 hours or more a day. They toil in factories-mostly girls in conditions of near slavery. They are confined in factory premises and barred from leaving the factory premises. They are frequently scolded and beaten. The girls are sexually exploited. There is no safety training. Accidents are not uncommon. They suffer with a host of ailments. Girls with frequent head-aches, stomach pain, sleepless and tiredness plus menstrual problems, infertility and respiratory ailments. Depression also sets in and suicides occur time to time but are usually hushed up.

In August (2015) it is disclosed that the children of the backward families of interior villages of Srikakulam town in A.P., are being sent to Gujarat, M.P, Kerala and a few other states in risky conditions as child labourers for years. The children are sent as labourers as parents are sucked into debt traps by money lenders. The children are made to work in wood-cutting factories, as labourers for fishermen families, daily wage workers, in packing works in soap factories and in oil factories among others. The children are also made to work on ships to do works such as cooking and cleaning and they are sexually harassed too.

### **Fascist Type of Repression on Agitating Anganwadi Workers**

Around one lakh nine thousand women Anganwadi workers in Andhra Pradesh are forced to enter into agitations time and again since the government is showing utter indifference towards their just demands. The A.P. Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu, who is notorious for having made to trample and rundown the agitating Anganwadi women workers by horses in his period of previous rule, once again taken his vindictive attitude against them in the present time of his rule.

These Anganwadi workers and helpers who are not paid minimum wages and exploited maximum through unspecified duties, demanding implementation of their recent and meagre wage hike resorted to protest actions. They reported to Chalo Vijayawada on December 18, to conduct a Dharna in front of the camp office of the C.M. Police force were brutally used to suppress the women Anganwadi workers who are protesting peacefully. Without any provocation, the peacefully protesting women workers were beaten, humiliated, manhandled and arrested. In the name of dispersing protesters these women were pricked with pins, cut with blades, kicked in their abdomens. Such fascist methods were used against them to thwart their agitations.

Not satisfied with this brutal police suppression, the government of A.P. issued a memo No 5557/K3/2015 dated 21-12-2015, directing all district-level ICDS officers to terminate the services of all the Anganwadi workers and helpers who participated in 18<sup>th</sup> December Vijayawada dharna. Thus the government of A.P. is trying to stifle the voice of Anganwadi workers who staged protest.

Thus the C.M, Chandra Babu Naidu, who announced that he would stamp down trade-unions with an iron heel, at a recent conference with industrialists in the recent past at Visakhapatnam, is proving himself to be a dictator, that would not tolerate any protest from working-class and who wants to fill the state only with the affluent and all the others to be subservient and slaves to them.

Such has been the fate of working lot in the present day 'neo-liberal democratic rule', to be subjected to feudal type of brutal suppression without even a right to protest.

All these above episodes manifest how the feudal practices are deeprooted in the very foundations of our system, reminding us the necessity to root-out this system of brutal exploitation and inequality thriving in our country.

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