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Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States

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MEHRAN KAMRAVA AND ZAHRA BABAR

Editors

Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgment</i>	vii
<i>About the Contributors</i>	ix
1. Situating Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf <i>Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar</i>	1
2. Beyond Labor: Foreign Residents in the Persian Gulf States <i>Attiya Ahmad</i>	21
3. Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States <i>Andrew Gardner</i>	41
4. Socio-spatial Boundaries in Abu Dhabi <i>Jane Bristol-Rhys</i>	59
5. Informality and Its Discontents: Mapping Migrant Worker Trajectories into Dubai's Informal Economy <i>Pardis Mahdavi</i>	85
6. Migration, Networks and Connectedness across the Indian Ocean <i>Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella</i>	105
7. India-Persian Gulf Migration: Corruption and Capacity in Regulating Recruitment Agencies <i>Mary Breeding</i>	137
8. Nepali Migrants to the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Values, Behaviors, and Plans <i>Nathalie E. Williams, Arland Thornton, Dirgha J. Ghimire, Linda C. Young-DeMarco and Mansoor Moaddel</i>	155
9. The Legal Regulation of Migrant Workers, Politics and Identity in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates <i>David Mednicoff</i>	187
10. Protecting Migrants' Rights in the Gulf Cooperation Council <i>Susan F. Martin</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	233

Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Persian Gulf States

*Andrew M. Gardner**

By some estimates, labor migration to the Persian Gulf states comprises the third largest migration flow in the contemporary world. In comparison with the scholarly literature concerning the larger migration flows to North America and Europe, our collective understanding of migration to the Gulf states remains in its infancy. Nonetheless, within the tidy scholarly literature concerning this transnational flow of labor one can discern a small constellation of nascent themes. One theme that threads through several decades of scholarly analysis concerns the problematic and exploitative labor relations that

* Grateful acknowledgment goes to the Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, for providing research funding for this project. I am grateful to all the members of the Center for International and Regional Studies Migrant Labor Working Group for the comments and questions that greatly improved this chapter, and to the migrant laborers in Qatar who so willingly shared their perspectives and experiences with me. Special thanks also go to the cohort of research assistants I employed for this project, including Deependra Giri, Yogamaya Mantha, Tara Thompson, Ramesh Pandey, and Nive Das.

seemingly characterize the experiences of many of the poorest transnational labor migrants who spend time in Gulf States.¹

The starting point and unexamined premise of this chapter, then, is that unskilled or low-income labor migrants typically face significant challenges and problems during their sojourn in the Gulf states. This premise remains an ethnographic assertion—one backed by a substantial ethnographic literature, an abundance of anecdotal support, and occasional contributions derived from small or localized surveys of particular migrant labor populations in the region.² Although the parameters of these challenges and difficulties are well documented elsewhere, a brief review will be useful to the reader. To summarize, the analytic focus of these works is typically centered on the coupling of the transnational labor brokerage system with the *kafala* or sponsorship system, by which foreign migration is managed and governed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States. In this system, many migrants receive less pay than they were contractually promised; many migrants work longer hours than their contracts originally indicated; non-payment of promised wages

¹ E.J.A.M. Spaan, “Socio-Economic Conditions of Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the Gulf States,” in F. Eelens, T. Schampers and J.D. Speckmann (eds), *Labour Migration to the Middle East: From Sri Lanka to the Gulf* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992); Anh Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Anh Longva, “Keeping Migrant Workers In Check: The Kafala System in the Gulf,” *Middle East Report* 211 (1999): pp. 20–22; Michele Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka’s Migrant Housemaids* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Anisur Rahman, *Indian Labour Migration to the Gulf: A Socio-Economic Analysis* (New Delhi: Rajat Publications, 2001); Staci Strobl, “Policing Housemaids: The Criminalization of Domestic Workers in Bahrain,” *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (2009): pp. 165–83; Andrew Gardner, “Engulfed: Indian Guest Workers, Bahraini Citizens and the Structural Violence of the Kafala System,” in Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (eds), *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 196–223; Andrew Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell University Press, 2010).

² See, for example, Silvia Pessoa, Marjorie Carlson, Hanoof Al-Thani, Samiha Kamel, Hicham Nedjari, Ramsey Ramadan and Karim Watfa, *The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar: The Workers’ Perspective*, Final Report, QNRF Undergraduate Research Experience Program Project, No. 07–12–03, 2008; Silvia Pessoa, Rooda Al-Neama and Maha Al-Shirrawi, *Migrant Workers in Qatar: Documenting their Current Situation*, Final Report, QNRF Undergraduate Research Experience Program Project, No. 05–09–71, 2009.

remains widespread; sponsors typically confiscate migrants' passports, thereby significantly impeding their ability to leave problematic employment situations; living conditions are often extremely overcrowded and difficult; socio-spatial segregation is the norm; and, for a variety of reasons, migrants have significant difficulty asserting their basic rights in these foreign states. This brief list is not comprehensive, but it does include many of the threads that weave through both the existing scholarly literature and many of the stories that will be presented later in this chapter.

For nearly a decade, my scholarly work has been focused on labor migration in the Gulf states, and as an ethnographer, my conclusions have been aligned with the framework I have just described: in sifting through the lived experiences of the hundreds of men and women who have shared some portion of their life with me, my analyses perennially focus upon the structural and systemic aspects that undergird the often exploitative relations encountered by many of these migrants when they enter into a contract for work in the Gulf.³ These conclusions about the extraordinary challenges many labor migrants face in the Gulf coexist with the fact that a vast flow of remittances streams from the Gulf to the countries from which these labor migrants come. In popular sentiment, these two facts are often portrayed in tandem: labor migrants yield a certain portion of their rights and render themselves vulnerable to exploitation in order to secure the economic opportunities provided by work in the wealthy Gulf states.

What this explanatory configuration obscures is the fact that the vulnerability and exploitation foreign migrants often encounter in the Gulf are unequally borne by the poorest members of that transnational population. While the aggregate Gulf remittance figures are astonishingly large, in my own ethnographic fieldwork amongst the unskilled population of labor migrants I have repeatedly encountered men and women for whom a sojourn in the Gulf states has been a financial catastrophe: by entering into an agreement to travel to the Gulf, these men and women enter into a system that is fully capable of separating them from the tiny fortunes they and their families have invested in sending them to the Gulf in the first place. In William Walters' analysis of illegality and deportation in Europe and North America, he discerns a "deportation industry," including not only police and immigration personnel, but also airline executives, pilots, stewards, and, perhaps more important, a constellation of private companies that profit from detention

³ See Gardner, "Engulfed", pp. 196-223; Gardner, *City of Strangers*.

and deportation.⁴ Borrowing this idea, I suggest we conceptualize the migration system in the Gulf—including the money lenders in South Asian villages, the labor brokers in sending countries, the manpower agencies in the Gulf states, the citizens who sponsor foreign labor, and managers and supervisors who serve as these sponsors' proxies—as a migration industry that is not only geared to aggrandizing profit from the labor of foreign migrants, but also capable of deriving profit from the migration process itself.

As noted, these conclusions about unskilled and semi-skilled labor migration to the Gulf states serve as a starting point for this chapter; the more detailed arguments by which I support this position can be found elsewhere.⁵ In presenting these findings and conclusions at various conferences and meetings over the years, I have encountered one recurring question, paraphrased as follows: “If things are as bad as you say, then why do migrants keep coming?”⁶ This chapter endeavors to answer that question. While the fieldwork informing my answer spans a series of projects conducted in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Qatar, I rely specifically upon the findings of a research project funded by the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.⁷ Through this particular project, I was able to follow a diverse group of ten low-income labor migrants through a year and a half of their lives in Qatar. I conducted monthly interviews with these men and women, and those interviews collectively provided me with their nuanced perspectives on the challenges and dilemmas they faced in their everyday lives in Qatar, as well as a perspective on the strategies they devised to overcome many of the challenges

⁴ William Walters, “Deportation, Expulsion, and the International Police of Aliens,” *Citizenship Studies* 6 (2002): pp. 265–92.

⁵ Gardner, “Engulfed”, pp. 196–223; Gardner, *City of Strangers*.

⁶ Out of respect to the colleague who first presented me with this line of inquiry, I refer to this as the “Bruce Mann question.”

⁷ The basis of this paper is field-based research conducted in Saudi Arabia (1999), the United Arab Emirates (2002), Bahrain (2002–03) and Qatar (2008–present). These various research projects were supported by the Saudi Arabian Meteorological and Environmental Protection Agency, the Foreign Language Area Studies Program, the Fulbright Program, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Qatar University, and the Qatar National Research Fund. While these various projects form a backdrop to the analysis presented here, I rely specifically on the ethnographic data gathered under the project entitled “A Longitudinal Analysis of Low-Income Laborers in Contemporary Qatar,” funded by the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

encountered. The project also allowed me the opportunity to visit these migrants' families and communities in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. Through those interviews and conversations with migrants and their families, I began to discern an answer to the aforementioned question, and in the ethnographic tradition, I use their experiences and their words to illustrate my arguments. That answer, in three sections, comprises the remainder of this chapter.

From economic poverty to structural violence

Economic concerns obviously play a key role in the impulse to depart one's home for the opportunities offered by employment in the Gulf states. While I will eventually complicate the simplistic logic underpinning this statement, it is undoubtedly true that salary levels in the Gulf represent the primary attraction of employment in the region for many migrants. For example, Ram,⁸ a forty-year-old migrant from the hilly regions of Nepal, left his village at the age of fourteen to make his way in the world. He worked in many different jobs in Nepal and India—for years he worked in a Chinese-owned leather tannery in Kolkata, earning IR 2500 (\$54) monthly, but eventually he left because of the dangerously unhygienic conditions of the factory work. He later found work as a driver in India, earning IR 7500 (\$160) a month minus expenses, but by then he was married with children, and was unable to make ends meet. In 2008, his brother-in-law arranged for work as a driver in Qatar, with the promise of a monthly salary of QR 600 (\$165) with expenses paid, and the possibility of earning even more. In Ram's particular case, that promise proved to be a mirage—upon arrival in Qatar, he received only QR 500 (\$137), and, as I will explain later in the chapter, his sponsor withheld several months' wages to cover the costs of driving instruction. Despite the problems he encountered, it is clear that the contractually promised wage levels in the Gulf states remain competitive in South Asian terms, and often substantially surpass salary levels in the poorer nations from which many migrants come. Because this economically grounded justification for migration is so widespread in the migrants' narratives about the decision to come to the Gulf, it certainly represents the first answer to the question of why, in the face of such difficulties, men and women continue to stream to the region.

The ethnographic approach, however, provides a good opportunity to complicate this simple logic, for the interviews I conducted contained stories and

⁸ All the names that appear here are pseudonyms selected by the participants in the study.

explanations that suggested a wide variety of extra-economic explanations for labor migration to the Gulf. Like Ram, Roshan was another of the ten migrants I spent time with between 2008 and 2010. In early 2008, conflicts between the Tamil Tiger rebels and the state forces reached a crescendo in the region surrounding his small village in the northern reaches of Sri Lanka. Despite growing up amidst a veritable civil war, Roshan had been an adept student, and his family worked hard to stay beyond the social and political margins of the conflict. In the spring of 2008, however, rumors began to spread that his sister's fiancé was an agent for the Tamil Tigers; later these rumors evolved into a contention that Roshan's future brother-in-law was a double agent of the state. On the eve of the young couple's wedding, masked motorcycle-borne gunmen shot and killed the young groom outside his pre-wedding party. The family subsequently spiraled into crisis. Roshan, eighteen at the time, seemed a likely target as well, although the family was unsure if it was the government forces or the rebels whom they should fear. Like many other families in the area, they feared Roshan's walk to school would be the last time they would see their son, so his education ceased. Weeks later, he was detained by the police, beaten, and, by his own account, charged with suspect dealings. Following the paths of many others enveloped in the Sri Lankan conflict, the family arranged for the young man to migrate to Qatar. I first met Roshan a week after his arrival in the Gulf.

Roshan's family is a poor family, and their financial problems were only compounded by the violence in the region. The economics of migration certainly played prominently in the context of their decision; after all, there were jobs in Qatar. But in my ongoing conversations with Roshan and, later, with his family in northern Sri Lanka, it became increasingly clear that it was the safety and survival of their son that drove them to mortgage farmland and pawn the household matriarch's jewelry to fund his trip abroad. Similar stories emerged in my discussions with members of the Nepalese contingent of migrants in Qatar, for many of them had arrived with stories of becoming embroiled in the Maoist insurgency sweeping through the low Terai plain found along Nepal's southern border. Divendra, another labor migrant, described how corruption in the Nepalese government left the small country with only an intermittent supply of electricity, and connected this corruption to his own decision to migrate to the Gulf. Recalling his own failed attempt to build a computer training institute, he noted that,

The main problem came when we were getting a lot of problems with the electricity. The electricity would be cut for six or seven hours. My business was totally dependent

WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?

on electricity. If there's no electricity for six or seven hours, especially in the daytime, then no one will come. How can I operate the computers? And I don't have enough money to buy a generator, because the cheapest generator in Nepal costs one lakh [\$1340]. So I cannot think about that. I was managing to run the institute, but when the electricity ... first it was five to six hours, then it was seven or eight hours—finally I thought it's no good. So I had to close the institute. I shut down my business and came here.

The recurrence of these sorts of stories with many of the migrants in my small study and, perhaps more tellingly, amongst many of the other men in the camps I frequently visited, displaces the economics of migration from its central place in the rational calculus driving migration to the Gulf. Certainly the calculations in the migrants' heads often involve money, debt, and prevailing wage levels, but the conditions they face in their home countries are often connected to socio-political forces that spill outside a strictly economic calculus. The concept of structural violence provides a more theoretically comprehensive angle on the forces driving out-migration—the widespread economic penury connected to decades of structural adjustment, for example, can be conceptually conflated with the violence and conflict that inevitably produces quasi-refugees dependent upon migration and the remittances it produces.⁹

Roshan's story yields a second point that merits further discussion. Like almost all of the South Asian men I have encountered in the Gulf, Roshan arrived in the Middle East not as a rational and individual economic agent, but rather as the emissary of a household livelihood strategy. In Roshan's case, all the arrangements were made for him by his family, and this was the case for many of the South Asian men I encountered in Qatar and Bahrain. The money needed to migrate as an unskilled laborer (typically \$1,500 to \$3,000) is generated at the household level from resources controlled by the family's patriarch; the decision concerning which member of the family will migrate

⁹ See Johan Galtung's seminal work and the subsequent articulation of the concept by Paul Farmer and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. In previous work, I have also used Eric Wolf's notion of structural power to expand the definition of structural violence to encompass the forces that produce highly exploitative relationships between migrants and citizen-sponsors in the Gulf. See Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (1969), pp. 167–91; Paul Farmer, "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology*, 45 (2004), pp. 305–25; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Dangerous and Endangered Youth: Social Structures and Determinants of Violence," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Volume 1036 (2004), pp. 13–46; Eric Wolf, *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Gardner, *City of Strangers*.

to the Gulf is decided at the level of the extended family; and the remittances generated by that individual's labor while abroad are often under the control of the migrant's parents. Vasu, for example, was a young labor migrant from a rural village in south India. He had worked as a driver in that village. His uncle, already at work in Qatar, helped arrange for him to come and work as a tea-boy for a company that serves one of Qatar's large government ministries. In describing that decision, Vasu explained his family's rationale:

My parents, my brother, my wife, my daughter and I were living in a very small house ... It's a government house. The government allots houses to farmers in our area. We don't own any property. We don't have land to call our own. Now, since I'm married, we need a bigger house. So we took a loan of IR 80,000 [\$1,704] plus interest from a riatu [a wealthy landowner] ... I don't know exactly what the agreement was because my father arranged the loan.

As his concluding statement suggests, Vasu was entirely unaware of the economics of his migration. Indeed, his entire working life had been directly enmeshed in the interests of the extended family. Vasu had originally dropped out of school to begin to work so that the family might assemble a dowry for his younger sister. As the family's finances continued to sputter, they sought a strategy that might allow them to eventually build a larger house or perhaps purchase some land. And as with most South Asian migrants, Vasu's remittances were largely controlled by his father. In the end, his and his family's hopes for a better future were dashed in a horrific accident that left his uncle dead and Vasu severely injured. During his long recovery, the company stopped paying his salary and the money stopped flowing home. Finally, his visa was cancelled, and as Vasu scrambled to find a new job that might accommodate his new disability, his family descended into a financial cataclysm.

As this section suggests, part of the answer to the question of why migrants keep flowing to the region requires that we disassemble some of the premises that underlie that question. One of those premises is that the migrant fits the mold of *homo economicus*—in other words, that she or he is an individual, rational economic agent. As these men's stories suggest, the unit at work in the decision process to migrate to the Gulf is typically not the individual but the family (and, in the case of South Asia, the extended family). While that family may or may not have perfect information about the wages and conditions migrants potentially face in the Gulf states (issues I will deal with more directly in the remainder of this chapter), it is often not the migrant himself who is making the decision about the migrant's sojourn. This social fact complicates the logic of Gulf migration: in many cases, migrants keep coming because their families insist upon it. I have also contended that the economic

rationale for migration, while certainly important, is often not the only factor involved in the decision to migrate. Utilizing the concept of structural violence, we can begin to connect the low wage levels and lack of opportunity many of these potential migrants face in their homeland with a much wider array of social and political forces that are intricately intertwined with the decision to migrate to the Gulf.

Contractual deception and the search for ignorance

When one looks for patterns and recurring events in the lives of the unskilled and semi-skilled laborers who arrive in the Gulf states, deception—particularly contractual deception—seems to occupy the center stage in their narratives. Many of the men in this study (and many of the men I have encountered over the years in the Gulf) arrive to a job that is substantially different from the position described to them in their home country. Most commonly this deception involves salary levels, working hours, and type of employment. While this deception is widespread, locating a particular juncture at which responsibility for it can be pinned is an impossible task: as the narratives I will present describe, this disinformation can come from a variety of parties who comprise the migration system connecting Qatar and the other Gulf states to the sending countries of Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Ram, the Nepalese driver whom I introduced in the previous section, built upon his years of experience as a driver in India when he departed for Qatar. Through a friend already in Doha, Ram was able to arrange for a visa enabling him to work as driver for a Qatari family. Arriving in Qatar, he was given QR 100 (\$27.50) for food and expenditures, and taken to a room in a labor camp within a mile of his sponsor's home. Very little happened in the first few months, and Ram struggled to understand his circumstances. He received no salary, but in the second month his sponsor gave him another QR 100 for food and other expenditures. The Qatari sponsor promised that he would receive his salary once he passed the driving exam, but the chain of events leading to that endpoint was formidable: Ram had to pass the medical exam, obtain an official ID, enroll in a 40-day driving course, and pass the driving exam, in that specific order. At the conclusion of his second month in Qatar, only the medical test was complete, and Ram finally confronted his sponsor. Shortly after that confrontation, he described his situation to me:

I am very much worried because I have not received any of the salary promised to me, and my sponsor has delayed my entry into the driving school. I complained to him

that I have received no salary and haven't been enrolled in the driving school, and so within a few days he produced my official ID. At least now I can enroll in the driving class. But I still won't receive any salary for several months. What can I do? How can I send my family the money they need?

The weeks following our conversation were equally difficult. Other migrants reported that he needed to pay the driving instructor extra money in order to pass the exam, but Ram had no extra money to give. He finally found another migrant willing to loan him QR 2,000 (\$550), but opted to send this home to his desperate family rather than use it for the driving instructor. He felt lucky when he received notice that he had passed the driving exam. His sponsor, however, informed him that his pay would be QR 500 (\$137), not QR 600 (\$165). By his own estimation, Ram had been working twenty hours a day on average, and for much of that time he endured various gardening and cleaning duties on top of his work as a driver. He confronted his sponsor several times in the following months, and while he was eventually able to obtain the QR 600 salary originally promised to him, he received no pay for the first three months of his time in Qatar. As his sponsor contended, over QR 3,000 (\$824) had been spent for the driving course, identification, medical test, and other costs—the sponsor was carrying this debt for Ram.

Such scenarios were common in the small pool of participants I followed in Qatar. Ramesh, an enterprising young migrant from the Nepalese Terai, was promised a job as a supervisor, but arrived to find he would work as a tea-boy at a significantly lower pay level. Rao, an Indian migrant from Andhra Pradesh, had both trained and worked at a welder in India, and departed for Qatar under the impression that he would be welding there as well. Upon arrival, however, he was demoted to welder-helper and its lower salary level. Divendra, Binod and Sanjay—three other participants in the project—arrived to jobs that roughly resembled those described to them in their homes (Nepal, Nepal, and India, respectively), but simply went unpaid for much of their time in Doha. Their companies were three or four months behind the promised salary schedule. The last of these three migrants, Sanjay, simply gave up on his company and returned to Kerala after his third month in Qatar. As all of this suggests, labor migrants frequently encounter misinformation and deception in their journey to the Gulf.

No single conduit shuttles labor to the Gulf. As the above stories suggest, some migrants arrange their sojourn in the Gulf with the help of relatives or friends with some connection to sponsors in the GCC states. Others work through a system of labor brokers that connects most regions of South Asia,

Africa, and Southeast Asia to the opportunities of the Gulf states.¹⁰ This brokerage system may include subagents who move from village to village in search of potential migrants (and therefore profit). These agencies may or may not be registered with the state. Legitimate brokers, whether registered or not, may or may not have good information about the jobs they purvey. For example, in discussing the working conditions the men he had sent to the Gulf face, one labor broker in south India clearly articulated how little he knew about the working conditions in the Gulf:

I don't know much about the working conditions in Doha. It depends on the company and the type of work and also the post of each worker. For example, a supervisor doesn't work under the sun the whole time. On the other hand, a welder works under the sun for about 8 hours a day. Not more than that. I don't think they work for 10 or 12 hours a day. All I know is that the companies who contact us are reputed and legitimate. And Qatar is a desert so the workers know what to expect. During the training session we make them work under the sun for a few hours ...

While labor brokerage firms and other formalized conduits play an important role in migration to the Gulf states, chain migration remains a vital conduit for tens of thousands of migrants to the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, migrants often find themselves complicit in the contractual deception that commonly occurs. By the end of his first year in Qatar, for example, Divendra's employer, a small construction company, faced a desperate labor shortage. Attrition (largely driven by the non-payment of promised wages) had left the company with too few drivers for the various trucks that served as the basis for the small business. Despite the fact that his company owed him and the other employees over three months of back wages, Divendra, who through hard work and extraordinary diplomacy had gained the trust of his Egyptian manager, was asked to utilize his networks in Nepal to bring a cohort of new truck drivers and laborers to Qatar. This put Divendra in a quandary. Could he live with the burden of bringing new migrants into such a problematic situation? The men would certainly blame him if things went awry, and from his experiences in the company, that was almost assured. At the same time, his own contract was approaching its conclusion, and if he did not keep his manager happy, it was entirely possible that the manager would significantly delay his

¹⁰ See Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*; Rachel Silvey, "Transnational Domestication: State Power and Indonesian Migrant Women in Saudi Arabia," *Political Geography*, 23 (2004), pp. 245–64; Prema Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 62–4.

departure. Divendra stalled for several months, but then the manager's tone became more urgent. Describing the situation, Divendra noted that,

Whenever the managers ask me to find replacements, I make up excuses and tell them that most of the Nepali men I know are going to Dubai soon ... My general manager told me to put an ad in the newspaper in Nepal for heavy duty drivers, and he told me that I would be responsible for everything. It would be my responsibility to shortlist the candidates so that he could issue visas for them. I'm very confused right now. I don't know what to do. There are only five months left on my contract. I think I have to play a game so that I can listen to the general manager and at the same time save the people in Nepal from entering his trap.

"[Andrew] How will you do that?"

I have a friend in Kathmandu. I will tell him to send an official email as XYZ manpower agency. I will send an official email to the make believe agency, and say that the company needs a few workers and I will tell my friend to reply. I will tell him to say that it would take about four months to recruit these men in Nepal so that I can buy some time with the general manager. After four months, it will be time for me to return and I will tell the manager that I would send him the CVs as soon as I go back to Nepal. Then when I finally go back, I will disappear. That's my plan.

As Divendra delayed, the general manager found a way to sweeten the offer. The manager suggested that Divendra and his Nepalese co-worker, Sam, would be welcome to extract (and keep) a QR 1,500 (\$413) or perhaps even QR 2,000 (\$550) fee from each of the thirty successful applicants. For Divendra and Sam—young men earning a salary of \$330 a month, most of which was directed to the moneylenders who financed their journey in the first place—this was an extraordinary amount of money. Divendra and Sam had already expressed an ethical concern with the proposal, for any men they brought to the company would face the same verbal abuse, non-payment of wages, and exploitation that had led to the current attrition in the first place. As we explored these issues further, however, Sam put a more practical frame on their decision to avoid facilitating more Nepalese migration:

[Sam] I said okay, I will try my best to find some new drivers in Nepal with the licenses for driving heavy trucks. But in truth I will not do this for the company, because these people, they are very bad and the company now has a very bad reputation. If I bring these people here, then certainly these people will face many problems. So I don't want to bring anyone here ...

[Andrew] So let's see ... that would be [calculating] ... QR 37,500 or so. That's \$10,000! That's big money!

[Sam] Yes, I could earn that much money from these twenty-five or thirty visas. But the main problem is when these people face the real problems here in Doha with a

WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?

company like this, they will tell all the truth about those problems to their family members and their parents in Nepal. And now the situation in Nepal is very bad. Again the Maoists are going to strike, and if by mistake anyone speaks of this to the Maoists, they will kill me. So why would I knowingly bring this trouble to myself?

[Divendra] \$10,000 he would be getting, but he would be facing a \$50,000 problem at home.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore the role that migrants themselves play in the representation of the Gulf and their experiences there. In this section, I have used the experiences and perspectives of several participants in this project to portray the complexities of this migration system and the multiple junctions at which deception is purveyed. In answering the question as to why migrants keep coming to the Gulf, I contend that we must also look to the complexities of a system that produces misinformation and disinformation across the transnational divide. As I have suggested, labor brokers provide one of the most visible links in this chain, but they are often working with poor information about the working conditions in the Gulf, and as Divendra's and Sam's experiences make clear, migrants themselves are often called upon to participate in this process and, for profit, represent employment in the Gulf in ways that differ significantly from the reality on the ground.

Labor migrants and the image of the Gulf

In late 2002, I was conducting fieldwork in Bahrain and, for bureaucratic reasons, I required another dozen passport photographs for the various forms and badges associated with my host institution. I made my way to a small photography studio at the end of the street, and after a brief discussion with the photographer/clerk I was ushered into the studio itself, located in the back room of the building. In that room were all the various accessories one would expect to find in a photography studio, along with an office desk located prominently on the stage side of the room. Next to the desk was a clothes pole with various sports jackets, button-up shirts, and clip-on ties. On the wall I could see examples of photographs that made use of this stage, set and props. I asked the proprietor about these photographs, and he described the reality of the situation in very straightforward terms: men who work menial and socially demeaning jobs burnish their image by sending home photographs of themselves sitting behind this desk in suit and tie. Across the transnational divide, custodians become office workers, tea boys become accountants, and clerks become managers.

Over time and years of fieldwork, this episode from 2002 evolved from an odd juncture in my fieldnotes to the central example of an interconnected web of observations that collectively point to the widespread and systemic generation of disinformation about working and living conditions in the Gulf. Without a doubt, migrants themselves are actively engaged in the production of this disinformation. These are pre-eminently understandable actions—men and women seek to protect their reputations, to assuage their worried families, and to shape their social identities in the publics to which they will eventually return. As Filippo and Caroline Osella have described, migration to the Gulf also produces subjectivities aligned to a set of pre-established identities (like the “Gulfie”) constructed in an earlier era when the association between Gulf migration and wealth was more assured.¹¹ Collectively, however, these actions contribute directly to the misrepresentation of conditions in the Gulf, and are therefore another integral component in the answer to the question at hand.

In the current decade, images have come to play a central role in the processes I seek to chart. The proliferation of camera phones and digital cameras means that even at the lowest echelons of the transmigrant workforce, images play an integral role in transnational communication and identity construction. The men and women I tracked in Qatar all had access to camera phones and/or cameras, and the production of images was one of the primary activities during their days off. Middle class denizens of Qatar and the other Gulf states are familiar with the sight of workers photographing one another in the green landscaped sites in front of shopping malls, in traffic circles, or along the Corniche. Perhaps what is less clear is that these sites are carefully selected by the migrants, and contrast sharply with the sites these men and women omit from their photographs. As Divendra described:

If we visited our camp today, and if I just stood in front of the apartment where you park your car, and we just took a photograph and sent it to my family, how would they feel? They would feel worried. They would think, if their accommodation is like this, what must their food and room be like? They often ask for photographs of where we stay, of the food, of the rooms, of the kitchen. They want to see it. They want to know what it's like where we stay. We just tell them that we don't have a camera, or that it's broken. I just keep telling them I will take photographs and I will send them to you later. These are the things that we do ... so when we send these photographs of us in these friendly and beautiful places [like shopping malls and parks], they will be happy for us.

¹¹ Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, “Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6 (2000), pp. 117–33.

WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?

As Divendra notes, his portrayal of his life in Qatar to family and friends is heavily edited. He carefully avoids including any images that might raise the concerns of his family, and present a carefully managed image of his time abroad.

Beginning in 2008 and 2009, many of the men in the labor camps I visited were seeking to purchase low-end netbook computers with any savings they could accrue during their work abroad. These netbooks are the latest entries into the lexicon of symbolically laden goods associated with successful migration to the Gulf (earlier it was Ray-ban sunglasses, gold chains, mobile phones, and digital cameras). In addition to their symbolic function, the presence of these netbooks in the labor camps gives many of the men access to Facebook and other social networking sites where more comprehensive portrayals of life in the Gulf can be articulated and tended. Like the images they send home, the portrayals amassed on Facebook and similar sites portray a green, leisurely, and high-consumerist life in place of the harsh realities many migrants face in their day to day lives in the Gulf.

While many of the men and women who migrate to Qatar and the other Gulf states depart their homeland with an image of the Gulf as a bountiful land of opportunity, they face significant challenges once in place in those states. Across the board, one of the most common difficulties they face is underpayment and non-payment of wages. With families and friends receiving only the sanitized version of the Gulf experience produced by the images and stories that travel back home, many migrants who face underpayment or non-payment of wages often begin to borrow money to keep up appearances. Ram, the driver I introduced early in this chapter, went four months without salary—he was receiving driving instruction, and his sponsor deducted the costs of the course from his salary—while Ram's family continued to plead for money. As noted earlier in the chapter, Ram finally borrowed QR 2,000 (\$550) from friends and remitted the money to his wife in Nepal. Similarly, Binod, a heavy truck driver from Nepal, was engaged in a protracted legal battle with his sponsor for much of 2009 and 2010. In the midst of that legal battle, the company stopped paying Binod, and Binod stopped working. He spent his days alone at the camp, and while he was very careful with his spending, his debts nonetheless slowly mounted. By the time his case was settled in June of 2010, he owed various friends thousands of Qatari riyals. Much of that money had been borrowed to send home to his family, and was part of his attempt to present a story of seamless and successful earning while abroad.

The carefully managed images of life in the Gulf became a particularly acute concern in planning my trips to visit with the families of the migrants I

tracked in Qatar. While all of the labor migrants were happy that I would visit their families and communities in South Asia, further discussions and pre-travel planning revealed concerns about potential damage I might cause to the images of life and work they had so carefully constructed from afar. In the interviews preceding my visits to Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India, I worked carefully with these migrants to grasp the limitations they wished to impose on my interactions with their families and, more specifically, on my descriptions of their life in Qatar. Many of these restrictions focused on the conditions in the labor camp: many of the camps lack running water and secure electricity connections, and many migrants live in extremely crowded and unhygienic conditions. The migrants sought (and received) my complicity in hiding these often difficult living conditions from family and friends in their home communities.

As I have already noted, these are certainly understandable actions: as the migrants themselves describe, they are mostly interested in protecting the emotional state of their loved ones back home, and the edited versions of life in Qatar and the other Gulf states are intended to insulate their family and friends from concern over the harsh realities many migrants face in the Arabian Peninsula. In aggregate, however, tens of thousands of migrants engaged in the production of a sanitized image of life in the Gulf fuel out-migration from these sending countries, for that image omits many of the exploitative and challenging aspects of the typical migration experience. To answer the question as to why migrants keep flowing to the region in spite of the often-challenging conditions they potentially face, we must accommodate the fact that migrants themselves, along with the labor brokers described in the previous section, construct an image of life in the Gulf that disguises or omits many of the significant challenges transnational labor migrants typically face.¹²

¹² In her examination of the Mexican/American flow of migrants, Balli provides an answer to this question as well. As one migrant described, "We get too carried away with the success stories we hear about in the United States ... We go there and pursue wayward lives. We cheat on our wives and ignore our children. And then we rent expensive cars and jewelry when we visit so that our families in Mexico will think that we have made it. We entice others to come back across the border with us, telling them lies about how good and easy it is. We tell them they can stay in our homes, but once they're around we get tired of them eating our food." Cecilia Balli, "The Border is Wide: Guarding the Southern Flank of the American Dream," *Harper's Magazine*, 313 (2006), p. 67. Similarly, George Packer quotes Folarin Gbadebo-Smith, the chairman of a district of Lagos Island, who also describes the

Conclusion

To recapitulate, in answering the question as to why unskilled and low-skill migrants continue to stream to the Gulf states in spite of the difficult conditions and exploitative labor relations many of them encounter in the region, I have argued that a variety of factors are at work in the calculus of Gulf migration. First, there is no doubt that the salary levels in the Gulf states remain competitive in the global context, and that the economic calculations these salary levels drive are a primary motivation for the continuing strength of these migration flows. Behind that simple fact, however, is the much more complicated mechanics of Gulf migration. I have argued that a variety of extra-economic concerns often play a central role in the decision to migrate, and that the decision to migrate often does not belong to the individual migrant, but rather to the familial unit. These factors complicate simplistic portrayals of the migration decision, and as I have argued here, these factors also foster the proliferation of poor information in the migration process.

In my close examination of the lives of a small set of labor migrants in Qatar, I have also begun to delineate the multiple junctures at which misinformation and disinformation are purveyed within this transnational migration system. Subagents and labor brokers in the sending countries often have poor information about the contracts they arrange, and profit incentives often become aligned with the purveying of disinformation about the challenges and difficulties men and women often face in the Gulf. Manpower agencies, citizen-sponsors and their proxies in the receiving states similarly benefit from the ongoing flow of migrants with incomplete or incorrect information about labor conditions in the Gulf states. With the scale of this migration flow in mind and the profit that is drawn from the migration process itself, I have contended that we can envision this system as a “migration industry” that uses

distorted picture that flows back to the village: “Come Christmas, everybody in Lagos—the successful and the unsuccessful—packs their bags and goes off to the rural areas to show off what they have achieved,” Gbadebo-Smith said. “Some achievements are real, for some it’s just a mirage, but everybody’s there showing off. So the young people in the villages very quickly come to the conclusion that ‘Hey, I’ve got to go to Lagos, make enough to be able to come back here, and to show off.’” In this way, the West African countryside is being rapidly depopulated. Cecilia Balli, “The Border is Wide: Guarding the Southern Flank of the American Dream,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 313 (2006), pp. 63–70; George Packer, “The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos,” *The New Yorker* (November 13, 2006).

poor information and disinformation to extract profit from the flow of unskilled migrants to the region.

Finally, I have contended that migrants themselves undoubtedly play a role in burnishing the image of the Gulf sojourn. By carefully grooming the portrayal of their time in the Gulf, individual migrants collectively contribute to the production of an image of the Gulf that often omits the primary challenges and difficulties that unskilled laborers experience in the region. These omissions are often tied to their desire to maintain their social status or placate worried families; however, through chain migration, the migrants' transmission of disinformation can also become tied to the profitable junctures of this migration industry.

Altogether, these multiple and overlapping factors complicate and problematize some of the fundamental premises underlying the question driving this chapter. The long tradition of *homo economicus* portrays humans—and migrants—as self-interested agents who make rational choices from the constellation of options presented to them. While the arguments presented in this chapter pose no challenge to the rationality of the Gulf migrant, that rationality faces a blizzard of misinformation and disinformation that renders that rationality almost meaningless. Nor is the migrant best conceived as a rational individual actor: more typically, I have noted, the migrant is the emissary of a familial livelihood strategy, and the purportedly rational decision to migrate is diffused within the extended family. As this suggests, analyses of this migration industry need to more directly apprehend the connection between imperfect information and profit.