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# Labor Camps in the Gulf States

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Viewpoints

# Migration and the Gulf

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# Labor Camps in the Gulf States

*Andrew Gardner*

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Over the past decade, migration to the wealthy states of the Arabian Peninsula has emerged as an increasingly central facet of scholarly attention to the region. This attention has resulted in the exponential expansion of our collective knowledge, and the near future promises even more nuanced and microcosmic analyses as recent and current fieldwork in the region bears fruit. Nevertheless, there has been little discussion of the “labor camps” in which many of the unskilled migrants dwell during their sojourn in the Gulf states. For nearly eight years, my own research has focused directly upon the South Asian migration flows to the states of the Arabian Gulf. Because of the ethnographic nature of my research, much of this time has been spent in labor camps with men from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and a handful of other places that send large contingents of unskilled labor to the region.<sup>1</sup>

The term “labor camp” is broadly used in the Gulf states to refer to a wide variety of labor accommodations. In the most general terms, we can discern four distinct types of such dwellings: First are the large and well organized labor camps that typically house the labor forces of the large public and private industries at work in the Gulf states. In general, these camps are recognized by unskilled transnational laborers as the best potential accommodations they might encounter while in the Gulf, for these large camps typically provide a constellation of amenities not always available in other types of camps, including air conditioning, a canteen/cafeteria, secure water sources, constant electricity, or recreational facilities.<sup>2</sup>

The second type refers to unstaffed apartment buildings or similar structures that contain numerous one-room accommodations, along with separate kitchens and bathrooms for communal use. Most of these buildings were constructed specifically for housing labor, although this category also includes buildings converted for this use.

Villas, the third type, are also referred to as labor camps in the Gulf states. Throughout the region, aging or otherwise undesirable villas are rented out as labor accommodations. Although these villas vary in size, they can (and often do) accommodate 50 or more laborers. Finally, many unskilled laborers dwell in *ad hoc* structures throughout the cities and their peripheries — in converted garages, plywood structures, shipping containers, or dwellings built from construction detritus.

There are no available data to help us understand the distribution of these camps in the city, nor do we have statistics about the distribution of labor among the various types. There is a significant contingent of unskilled labor in the Gulf states who live in apartment buildings that are not referred to as labor camps. Most of the unskilled laborers working in the domestic sector live in private residences. Nonetheless, based on my 1. This research occurred primarily in the United Arab Emirates (2002), Bahrain (2002), and Qatar (2008-present), and was funded through a variety of sources, including the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Fulbright Program, Georgetown University’s Center for International and Regional Studies Migrant Labor Grant Program, Qatar University’s Faculty Start-Up Grant, and the Qatar National Research Fund’s Undergraduate Research Experience Program.

2. For a related discussion, see Ahmed Kanna, “Dubai in a Jagged World,” *Middle East Report*, No. 243 (Summer 2007).



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extensive fieldwork in Bahrain and Qatar, it seems clear that the majority of labor migrants working in unskilled positions in the region live in labor camps. Almost all of the men and women in these labor camps have no control over the selection of their dwelling. The *kafala* system (sponsorship system) that organizes and governs the flow of labor to the region contractually binds laborers to their employers; these employers typically place laborers in the camp they either own or rent.

In those camps, men (and, less frequently, women) typically live six-to-eight individuals per room, although these numbers vary significantly. Many states in the Gulf have promulgated regulations to limit the number of men per room, but in my experience it seems evident that these regulations are widely ineffective or ignored. Although laborers are usually unable to select their accommodation, within the camp they are generally free to segregate as they wish into particular rooms. This process has been of particular interest to me; my ethnographic work has attempted to explore the dynamics at work with this self-segregation. In general, the predominant variable seems to be language: Laborers typically seek to room with laborers with whom they can easily communicate. This often results in segregation by nationality, although in my work I have charted numerous exceptions: Men from southern Nepal rooming with men from northern India, and men from Tamil Nadu rooming with Tamil Sri Lankans.



Labor camp made of prefabricated dwellings. Industrial Area, Qatar. Photograph by Deepin Giri.

Considering that most of the unskilled laborers in the Gulf states are from South Asia, I also have explored the impact of caste and religion upon this self-segregation. Without exception, the men I have interviewed report that caste plays an assuredly negligible role in the camps and in the individual rooms. Perhaps more interestingly, the Hindu/Muslim tensions that South Asian men often report as paramount in their home countries are extremely muted in the labor camps. As the men have noted to me, the difficult working conditions they often face in the Gulf states allow no time or energy for these conflicts. As one Indian migrant noted to me, “politics is a luxury we cannot afford here.”



Apartment-style labor camps. Industrial Area, Qatar. Photograph by Deepin Giri.

The notable exception to this relatively pacific portrait of labor camps in the Gulf occurs in those situations where unskilled Arab and South Asian labor is co-housed. While contingents of unskilled Arab labor have been a fairly uncommon feature of the many camps I have visited, those camps that co-house contingents of Egyptian or other Arab unskilled labor with South Asian labor clearly demonstrated a higher level of conflict. In analyzing the experiences and perspectives of the South Asian men I have interviewed, I have concluded that the combination of linguistic, national, religious, and particularly ethnic difference enables this conflict. South Asian laborers and Arab laborers are generally unable to communicate, which certainly causes some difficulties. At the same time, these

Arab laborers' facility with Arabic empowers them in the Gulf societies. Building on the commonalities they share with members of the host societies, unskilled Arab migrants clearly wield more control

over their own fate in these foreign societies. As a result, they clearly differentiate their position in those societies from those of the South Asian laborers. Typically this conflict takes the form of everyday violence — in the kitchens and bathrooms of the camps, and in the workplace.



The Gulf villa as a labor camp. Al Khor, Qatar.  
Photograph by author.

Labor camps are not evenly distributed in the Gulf cities. Instead, these camps coagulate in particular neighborhoods or peri-urban regions of the city. Unpacking the complex forces that drive the segregation of these spaces in the larger domain of the city is beyond the scope of this essay; however, in general terms, labor camps are typically relegated to industrial zones or other marginal locations backstage to the city.<sup>3</sup> In Doha, for example, the “Industrial Area” is a vast grid of streets, adjacent to the periphery of Doha, where light-to-heavy industry is intermixed with innumerable large and small labor camps. This “organic” or unplanned segregation of labor to the offstage zones of the city has now been joined by plans underway around the Gulf for “Bachelor Cities” and other master-planned mini-cities intended to house these unskilled migrant populations and, more directly, decrease the public visibility of these foreign labor forces in the Gulf states. Plans to move low-

class South Asian men out of public view is driven by the widespread sentiment that these men pose a threat to the cultural security of the citizenry, a sentiment that incorporates gender, class, and racial anxieties prevalent in the host societies. In exploring these anxieties in a set of ethnographic interviews with young Qatari women, my initial conclusion is that these anxieties are not the product of empirical experience, but rather are best understood as the articulation of a collective anxiety concerning the security of these states’ social and cultural integrity. Perhaps these tensions are endemic to states with such a heavy dependence on foreign labor.

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3. Andrew Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Ithaca: ILR/Cornell Press, forthcoming).