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# Constructing Qatar: Migrant Narratives From the Margins of the Global System

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# **Constructing Qatar:**

Migrant Narratives from the Margins of the Global System

Edited by Andrew Gardner and Autumn Watts

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# Introduction: Labor Migration in the Gulf States

Authors: Andrew M. Gardner and Autumn Watts

Everywhere we look in the world, migration seems to be accompanied by extraordinary challenges and serious problems: in the United States, would-be migrants cling to makeshift rafts to make their Caribbean crossing or risk their lives in the hot and empty deserts of the American southwest. Migrants face equally potent risks as they stream into Europe from North Africa, central Asia, and other locations. Although Europe and North America are frequently discussed as destinations for transnational migrants, our understanding of transnational migration to the Arabian Peninsula remains undeveloped. Qatar is one of the six petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. After North America and Western Europe, these six states comprise the third largest regional destination for transnational migration in our contemporary world. However, very little attention has been directed at the experiences of the men and women who travel from the sending countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere to the Gulf States in search of a better life. Upon their arrival in the Gulf, migrants face challenges that frequently differ substantially from those that characterize other well-known migratory destinations. What little scholarly attention currently exists has mostly been directed at the coupling of a vast labor brokerage system that, oftentimes, exploitatively connects men and women to jobs in the Gulf and the *kafala*, or sponsorship system, that governs and constrains their existence in the Gulf.

In Qatar, labor migrants comprise approximately 85% of the total population and, while that figure includes members of the transnational middle class, the vast majority of that migrant population is made up of unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. These men and women typically dwell in labor camps in the industrial hinterlands of the city. The peripheral urban spaces to which they are consigned are one component of a system of profound social segregation built upon a foundation of social, cultural, linguistic and class difference, which characterizes all the extraordinarily heterogeneous cities of the Arabian Peninsula. Labor migrants are, of course, visible everywhere in the city -- in large work crews, in matching uniforms, on the buses that carry them between labor camps and construction sites -- but those encounters from a distance are the limits of typical interaction between them and the middle and upper classes of both foreigners and citizens who make a home, however temporary, on the peninsula. While this foreign labor force is integral to the development plans of the wealthy Gulf nations, the sheer number of migrants, their foreignness, and their class position produce widespread anxieties amongst the peoples of the Gulf States. The vast foreign labor force present in the region is often framed as a threat to the social and cultural integrity of the minority citizenries.

The narratives included in this book are intended to illuminate the experiences of the migrants who travel to the Gulf States in search of a better life. Collectively, they are the product of a project funded as part of the Qatar National Research Fund's Undergraduate Research Experience Program (UREP).<sup>1</sup> The mission of the program is to engage undergraduates in the research process by providing them with an opportunity to work under the close supervision of faculty scholars and researchers. Our project, *Constructing Qatar: Migrant Narratives from the Margins of the Global System*, sought to engage students in the ethnographically-grounded objective of bridging the distance wrought by the social segregation characteristic of the contemporary Gulf state. The project's central mission was to provide the global reading public with an opportunity to confront the humanity of the men and women who toil in our midst in the Gulf. We hope to provide our readers with an opportunity to grapple with these migrants' individuality, with the complex circumstances that brought these men and women to the Gulf States, and with the experiences they endure while far from family and home.

While we hope that these stories will speak for themselves, a general description of the migration system in the Gulf States will help contextualize some of these individuals' experiences and perspectives. At the outset, it should be stated that the vast majority of migrants at work in Qatar and

the other Gulf States are low-skill or unskilled workers, and it is this population that is the focus of this book. They are employed in all sorts of capacities but, as the reader can perceive from these stories, large numbers of the men are involved in the construction industry. Many others -- and especially many of the female migrants -- work as domestic servants in private households or in the service industry. Men in the domestic sector often work as chauffeurs, or “drivers” in the parlance of the Gulf. The unskilled and low-skill migrant populations in the region come to the Gulf from many different places, but, in demographic terms, migration flows from South Asia -- India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh -- currently predominate.

From the vantage point in these sending countries, securing employment in the Gulf is no simple feat. Many of these men and women make use of personal connections -- they depend upon family and friends already working in the Gulf States, or upon return migrants with networks and contacts abroad. Most, however, arrange their work with labor brokers in the sending states. These brokers funnel workers to opportunities in the Gulf and, in the process, extract a profit. The two-year labor contracts that are typical of work in the Gulf are a commodity in these poor sending countries, and would-be migrants often pay substantial sums (typically between \$1000 and \$3000) for the right to work in the Gulf. Significant portions of the income they generate while abroad are directed to repaying the loans incurred for migration in the first place.

Labor migrants who enter this system are received by a ‘sponsor’ in the Gulf States. That sponsor might be an individual -- say, the citizen who is seeking an employee or servant. The sponsor might also be a manpower agency -- a business that provides labor services in some manner. This sponsorship system is a key characteristic of migration in the Gulf States. In Arabic, it is referred to as the *kafala*, and, as a system, it locks migrants to a particular job and a particular sponsor. Unlike most migrants in the United States and Europe, labor migrants in the Gulf are not free to seek other employment or better opportunities. Switching jobs requires a release from the original sponsor; to switch jobs without that permission is illegal. In practice, the power of the sponsor over the migrant is a dominant force in migrants’ experiences in all of the Gulf States.

In terms of their everyday life in the Gulf, labor migrants in the Gulf States most typically dwell in labor camps. The term itself is somewhat deceptive, for it describes a variety of different accommodations, including the large dormitory-style housing, large villas no longer desirable to Qatari citizens, abandoned cinder-block garages, and even ad-hoc structures made of construction scrap. The most common form of labor camp is the first on that list -- dormitory-style accommodations with separate communal bathrooms and kitchens. While some of these labor camps are more than sufficient, many are substandard: migrants often sleep six or more to a room, and may lack a steady supply of water and electricity. The conditions of the labor camps are a recurring theme in the migrants’ expressions of the challenging aspects of their existence abroad.

Finally, it should be noted that the term “migrant” is, by some estimations, an incorrect term for these men and women. For the unskilled and semi-skilled class of foreigners at work in the Gulf States, becoming a citizen is an impossibility. Indeed, citizenship in these wealthy states is laden with significant financial benefits and is oftentimes genealogically calculated and hence is largely closed to foreigners who work in the region. From the vantage point of the Gulf States and citizens, these men and women are guest workers of a temporary nature. From the vantage point of the men and women who seek a better life through work in the Gulf, however, their journeys are often framed as migrations, and their trips to Qatar are often only one chapter in the migratory labor circuits that can keep them away from home for most of their working life. In this light, they are transnational migrants tethered to a distant home.

While these contextual factors should help the reader comprehend some of the dilemmas described by the men and women whose stories comprise this book, our purpose here is not analytical. All six of the

student researchers who collected and polished these narratives were trained in the techniques of the ethnographic interview. After multiple interviews with the men and women who participated in the project, the students crafted narratives aimed at a public audience.

Extracting these third-person narratives from interview transcripts entailed careful attention to the ethics and responsibilities of translation. The students were tasked with presenting the tales that their informants chose to share, while making decisions toward readability and coherence. Doing so entailed filtering external information -- factual, objective knowledge -- from internal information -- knowledge that stems from the informant's personal interpretations, emotional responses, and understandings. Translating this information and making decisions about what to include or exclude is a complex and delicate task, and the students paid sensitive attention to this when crafting the narratives. They also tried to capture the individual voice of each informant so that their story was not a sterile list of events, but rather infused by the complex person who recounted them. Certain words or observations particularly resonated with anger, wit, or poignancy. Whenever possible, the students tried to incorporate these into the narrative, to convey the person behind the story, and to give them presence and voice.

These stories are not fictionalized; all details -- even the most intimate -- are drawn exclusively from information given in the interviews. Any decision to reorder, compress, interpret, or paraphrase was made with great care and respect and with the concerns outlined above in mind.

The coherence of these narratives masks the extraordinary challenges the student-researchers faced in locating, accessing, and communicating with the men and women who participated in this project. To address the risks participants took in sharing the details of their life with the student researchers, we have reproduced their narratives under the cloak of pseudonymity: all names have been changed -- including the names of villages, employers, and some locations -- to ensure the safety and anonymity of these men and women. Furthermore, the photographs that accompany this work, while intended to help contextualize these stories to readers unfamiliar with migration in the region, include none of the men and women who participated in the project.

Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to the Qatar National Research Fund for funding this project, and most importantly, to the men and women who shared their lives with us.

Andrew M. Gardner

Tacoma, Washington 2011

Autumn E. Watts

Doha, Qatar 2011

## Chapter One

### **The Business Plan**

Author: Elizabeth Jose

Arvind looked at his watch. It was still early. He had time to carry out his plan, but he would have to hurry. What if someone from the government saw him? He unfolded his ladder, climbed to the highest rungs, and began to reach for the top shelf. Gathering as many items as he could hold in two hands, he lifted them off the shelf and dropped them into the plastic container below. When the container was full, he stepped down, picked it up, and quickly exited his shop. He turned the corner and jogged up the back stairs to his tiny room. Opening the door, he walked directly to his bed and emptied the contents of the container onto it. Without pausing, he turned and ran back to his shop to repeat the process. Slowly, container by container, he emptied the shop. He started with the top shelves and worked his way down until every shelf and stand had been stripped bare. The first phase was complete.

Visiting several shops around the corner, Arvind asked the owners for empty boxes. He collected a great number of these boxes, both large and small. Carrying them back to his shop, he got to work sealing each empty box with white tape and then marking it. Once this had been done, he began placing them onto the empty shelves. Arvind looked at his watch again. It was now well past midday. There were only a few hours left before the souk would be swarming with crowds of men who would surely notice him. He worked furiously behind the shop's closed doors.

Arvind grew up in a large family of six in Mallapuram, Kerala. When he was seven, his parents divorced. He and his siblings moved in with his mother. He studied until the ninth grade, after which his mother sent him to an uncle in Mumbai. There he apprenticed at a small workshop and learned the welding trade. Mumbai, long a hotspot for job opportunities, attracted people from all over the country in those days. After he completed his training, he worked in the city for another two years before returning to Kerala.

Upon his return, Arvind quickly realized that a career in welding wouldn't pay well, and it held little promise of advancement. After much searching, he finally took an office job with the Kerala State Road Transport Company (KSRTC), and there he found a life. He worked there for nineteen years, and, during this time, Arvind involved himself with one of the major political groups in Kerala. He took part in the speeches and demonstrations held in the city. A few years later, however, a rival political group came into power and took control of the entire public transportation service in Kerala. In a calculated move, they terminated Arvind for his political opposition. He approached a number of judges and several government offices to appeal his case, and, after two years of perseverance, he reclaimed his job. While working at the KSRTC for the second time, Arvind married a woman of his parent's choice. The year was 1976, and, four years later, the young couple was blessed with a daughter. By his own recollection, they led a comfortable life.

Over the years, Arvind often received phone calls from friends working in the Gulf. They urged him to follow in their path. They spoke of how much money they earned and how he, too, could grow rich. Arvind refused their offers, for he had always been satisfied with his work in Kerala. As the years passed, however, his burdens grew. Like many traditional Indian men, Arvind followed the custom of financially supporting his parents and siblings. His younger sister was approaching a marriageable age, and his parents grew more urgent with their wishes to find her a spouse. This would require a handsome dowry. So, at last, Arvind began to listen to his friends' entreaties. He considered the option of going to the Gulf for a few years to make extra money for his sister's dowry payment and then finally relented. His brother-in-law sent him a work visa from Qatar, and Arvind arrived in Doha in



1986.

He began work at his uncle's textile shop in the Doha souk and shared sponsorship under his uncle's Qatari silent partner.<sup>2</sup> When the uncle went on vacation to Kerala, he asked Arvind to manage the shop in his absence. His uncle kept fifty percent of the shop's profits, and Arvind kept the other fifty percent, an amount which typically surpassed QR 1000 (\$275) every month. At the end of each year, he paid QR 500 (\$137) to his sponsor as a fee. When his uncle returned, Arvind moved to another shop that required a temporary shopkeeper, and, in that way, he hopped from shop to shop within the same souk for two years. When men wanted to return to their homeland for an extended visit, they would call Arvind. People knew he possessed an honest character, and they were willing to entrust him with their finances. Although he was from the southern Indian state of Kerala, Arvind had learned Hindi during his time as an apprentice in Mumbai, and he used this language to reel in customers from different backgrounds. In fact, profits often increased under Arvind's temporary management. Over a few years of moving shop to shop, he sent home 50,000 Indian Rupees (\$1127) and 40 sovereigns of gold jewelry for his sister's dowry.

In 1989, after months of hard work and careful living, Arvind saved enough money to purchase a ticket to return to India on vacation -- his first time home in three years.

After a short and happy visit, upon returning to Doha, Arvind scouted the souk for shop owners who needed a temporary shopkeeper. However, his search was futile, and he could not secure work anywhere. A month passed. Just as Arvind started to panic, a friend came to his rescue. He informed Arvind of a shopkeeper in the souk who was looking to sell his store. Buying the shop would be a good investment, he thought, for it would allow him to keep all of the profit rather than his standard half. Also, hundreds of South Asian workers frequented the area in which the shop was located, thereby guaranteeing a steady flow of customers. The following day, Arvind visited the shop and came to a verbal agreement with the owner about the sale and price of purchase. He agreed to buy the shop for QR 4000 (\$1100). This depleted his savings, and he borrowed the remainder from his uncle.

Compounding the situation, Arvind's family in Kerala had quickly spent his remittances on his sister's wedding and other domestic needs. Consequently, after six years abroad, he had little to show for his time and labor. In fact, he now teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, for everything he had and more was tied up in the new shop. With all of these financial pressures hovering over him, he finally devised a shrewd strategy to rebuild his savings. Every foreigner wishing to run a business in Qatar is required to obtain consent from their sponsor. In return, the sponsor takes a cut -- sometimes significant -- of the monthly profits of the business. Arvind decided he would simply not inform his sponsor about the purchase of the shop. If his sponsor knew nothing of his business venture, Arvind could keep the additional profits he would normally pay to this Qatari. Of course, not obtaining the sponsor's permission is a dangerous violation of the law. But his situation was critical, so Arvind went ahead with his plan.

When he approached the seller a week later, however, he found he now faced another problem. The owner had obviously found another buyer -- and most probably had been promised a higher price -- for he now bluntly dismissed the terms of their previous agreement. The man claimed that his sponsor was refusing to allow the sale. Arvind sensed a ruse, and, in a confident and authoritative tone, he brought his own bluff to the table. Contending that his own sponsor was a "big officer" in the police force, he forcefully implied that he would readily get the police involved if the shop owner went back on his word. It was enough to frighten the man, and he quickly caved to Arvind's demands. Within a couple of weeks, Arvind was the proud owner of a store in Doha.

Arvind purchased the shop in 1990. The store specialized in low-quality perfumes, T-shirts, cheap sunglasses, and an assortment of other everyday items. For three years, he managed to operate it

furtively without word reaching his sponsor. But the good times could not last forever. Rules and policies about property ownership and business within the country were amended and tightened, and, as a result, regular inspections by the municipality became commonplace. When the authorities unexpectedly came knocking at his door, demanding to see the shop license, Arvind bought himself extra time by assuring them that the store had just opened a week ago and that he was in the process of getting his sponsor to sign the legal documents. They believed him and agreed to return the following week.

Arvind was in a tight spot. He could not continue to operate the store without his sponsor's consent. Conversely, if he informed his sponsor about the store he had been illegally operating, he could be imprisoned. Worse still, his sponsor could seek some or all of the profits he had amassed over the last three years. Contemplating this dilemma, he came up with a plan. The next morning, Arvind woke up at the crack of dawn and went down to his shop. He looked at his watch. It was still early. He had time to carry out his plan, but he would have to hurry. What if someone from the government saw him? He unfolded his ladder, climbed to the highest rung, and began to reach for the top shelf.

\* \* \* \*

Later that day, Arvind phoned his Qatari sponsor, and the man arrived to inspect the shop the following evening. No visible evidence of his earlier furious activity remained. The shelves were filled with boxes, each of which had been sealed by Arvind over the past day. All of them were empty. Arvind explained that the previous owner had finished boxing up his merchandise, and all of it would be cleared out shortly. Buying the shop would be a good investment, he declared. The location was perfect. Arvind studied his sponsor's face. The plan was complete. His sponsor agreed: it would be a profitable store.

The following week, Arvind's shop looked exactly as it had a month before. The shelves were stuffed with T-shirts, perfumes, hair clips, and other odds and ends. Heavy plastic sheeting hung over the entrance to keep out the summer heat. The only thing that was different was the small white document on the wall behind the cash register: a business license, complete with an official government seal.

\* \* \* \*

For several years, Arvind continued doing business at the same store. He paid his sponsor QR 2000 (\$550) in annual fees, and he sent home another 40 sovereigns of gold ornaments for his second sister's wedding. With his second sister married, his obligations to the family were winding down, and he turned his attention toward securing the future of his own small family. By 2005, he had settled his daughter in marriage and purchased a piece of property on which he intended to build his own house. A couple years later, the construction was almost complete and his debts nearly paid. Arvind hoped to spend a few more years in Doha saving as much as he could. Then, finally, he would return home for good.

In 2008, however, his sponsor passed away. The sponsor's son demanded QR 6000 (\$1648) a year -- triple the previous fee. In addition, Arvind would have to pay for his own visa and business license fees. The building rent had also increased; he now pays an additional QR 750 (\$206) every month. And the costs of renting a small apartment were increasingly burdensome: Since the 2006 Asian Games in Qatar, rents around the city had skyrocketed. Where he used to pay QR 400 (\$110), he now pays QR 1400 (\$385) every month for a bare, single room. He struggles to send money home every month.

In recent months, an official visited Arvind's shop to inform him that the government, as part of its urban development plan, will demolish the entire souk. In its place, a business district with office towers will rise. He has until the end of the year to sell the store and purchase another or else return to

his home country. Arvind has spent almost 23 years in Qatar, and he can see his story in the Gulf drawing to a close. The government has agreed to pay QR 30,000 (\$8238) for the shop, but this money will be directly transferred to his sponsor. Arvind doesn't know if he is entitled to any portion of it, and he doubts he will receive anything.

Buying another shop in Qatar is impossible for shop owners like Arvind. Like the others, he simply doesn't have the capital to make such an investment. After scouring several locations in Qatar, Arvind learned that rents for new stores begin at QR 10,000 (\$2746) per month. In his best months at the current location, he makes QR 4000 (\$1098). Furthermore, building owners demand QR 100,000 (\$27,460) up front. Even if he managed to pay all that, he would still have to do business for a few years to build up a new customer base to generate any profit. With the high rents and fees, he doesn't think it can be done.

Soon the souk will be demolished, and this aging Indian neighborhood in the heart of the city will disappear. But even in its twilight, on Friday evenings, the roads of the souk are completely transformed. Streets that were vacant and empty in the morning fill with activity and life by dusk. Thousands of South Asian men come from around the city to meet their friends, to eat, and to shop.

Arvind spent twenty-three years in this place. Now, finally, it is time to go home.