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Rise of blue-collar workers from Uttar Pradesh in Gulf countries

Over the last 10 yrs, the no. of blue-collar workers migrating to Gulf nations from Kerala fell by over 90%.

By Ishani Duttagupta, ET Bureau | Updated: Jan 27, 2019, 10:02 AM IST

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Despite the state government's outreach, the recruitment of rural workers is still happening largely through informal networks — of friends, family and

An Indian worker in the Gulf — does that bring to mind the image of a Malayali from Malappuram toiling away at a construction site in Abu Dhabi? The old stereotype is no longer valid. Over the last 10 years, the number of blue-collar workers migrating to the Gulf countries from Kerala fell by over 90% — from 1,63,737 in 2008 to 14,496 in 2018, according to the latest ECR (emigration clearance required) passport information from the Ministry of External Affairs.

workers to the Gulf countries is from Uttar Pradesh (86,273 in 2018) and Bihar (59,181). A typical Indian blue-collar worker would now be a labourer from a village near Varanasi slogging away at the construction site of a football stadium in Qatar for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

It's not just Malayalis. The overall number of Indian workers going to the Middle East has fallen significantly over the last 10 years — from 7,62,484 in 2008 to 3,21,721 in 2018 — according to the MEA data.

The MEA numbers confirm the findings of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram. Its Kerala Migration Survey, released in September last year, found an 11.6% fall in the number of workers going to Gulf countries from Kerala in 2018 over the previous year.

S Irudaya Rajan, professor, CDS, says the decline is largely due to falling wages in the Middle East after the 2008 recession. "Due to the rising wages in Kerala, most countries in the Middle East are no longer attractive for young immigrants from the state. Following the global economic downturn, the wages in the Gulf countries have fallen to as low as \$100 a month in some cases. The wage differential is insignificant between Kerala and countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and it is no longer attractive to go there," he says.

Which Middle East Countries are Indians Going to?			From Which States are They Going to Gulf Countries?		
2009		2018	2009		2018
1.29.581	UAE	1.12.059	1.25.548	Uttar Pradesh	86.273
2.80.991	Saudi Arabia	72.399	50.162	Bihar	59.181
41.729	Kuwait	57.613	77.665	Tamil Nadu	31.588
46.239	Qatar	34.471	1.19.188	Kerala	14.496
74.644	Oman	36.037	42.023	Andhra Pradesh	15.528
17.381	Bahrain	9.142	21.177	West Bengal	28.648

*Numbers are based on emigration clearance required for passports. These would be of blue-collar workers
 Source: MEA, 2019

Young workers from Kerala, says Rajan, are more aspirational than their counterparts in the North and many who want to immigrate are now learning skills that countries like Australia and Canada demand.

Over the last decade, CDS data point out, low-skilled workers from Kerala have been replaced with workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as well as from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal.

The NRI Department of Uttar Pradesh is making efforts to address the issues of its migrant workers. "We understand that due to our demographic advantage, Uttar Pradesh now has the highest number of workers going to the Gulf countries," says Swati Singh, NRI minister, UP.

The government of Uttar Pradesh, through UPFC-OMRA (UP Financial Corporation-Overseas Manpower Recruitment Agency) is directly engaged in pre-departure orientation programmes that provide information on visa, emigration rules, employment contracts, customs regulations, travel formalities, among others. It also organises skill upgrade programmes for job aspirants — from courses in spoken English and communication to training in computers. The state has also launched UP NRI Grievance Redressal System, with cells at Gorakhpur, Lucknow, Meerut, Noida and Varanasi districts.

Despite the state government's outreach, the recruitment of rural workers is still happening largely through informal networks — of friends, family and local agents. Experts point out that once they reach the Middle East, working conditions can often be miserable: they live in cramped labour camps and their passports could be confiscated by employers. There are many exceptions as well. "There are anecdotal examples of village boys from economically backward families in eastern UP who have gone to work in the construction industry in Gulf countries for a few years and have returned with a lot of money and bought property. Their families are better off and the state government is benefitting from remittances," says RP Mamgain, economics professor at the Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow. He adds that many youngsters are arming themselves with training and diplomas in plumbing and carpentry — skills required in the construction sector.

"National data shows that employment opportunities in UP have been declining over the last decade in both formal and informal sectors. Also, unlike Kerala, the UP government has not been able to implement higher minimum wages.

Hence migration to other states and overseas is likely to become a growing trend in the coming years, especially for men in the age group of 20-50 years," says Mamgain.