

The Hidden Cost of Migrant Labor

What It Means to Be a Temporary Person in the Gulf

By [Deepak Unnikrishnan](#)

February 7, 2020



A
canceled
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Emirates for
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guest
worker
from India,
September
2015

Lee
Hoagland
/
Redux

I was recently in Berlin to give a talk about my book, *Temporary People*, to a roomful of scholars whose work focuses on the countries of the Persian Gulf. Set in the United Arab Emirates, my fiction explores the lives of people like my parents, men and

women who left their homes in the southern Indian state of Kerala in the 1970s to work abroad. It is steeped in the South Asian lingo of much of the UAE's immigrant population. My stories dwell on the consequences of migration to the Gulf, on what that movement of people does to both home and host countries, to languages, and to families.

The day before the event, I had dinner with my European hosts. They surprised me by introducing themselves as “temporary people,” too, transplants from different countries and marginalized communities in Europe, now living and working in the largest economy of the European Union.

At first, I was a little taken aback by their description of themselves, however sincere. I was surprised that they related to me. I didn't think we shared the same experiences. Did they have childhood memories of strangers noting their foreign nationality? Did they feel exposed by the color of their skin? And did they, like me, have a chip on their shoulder because they'd managed to jump social classes? As two European academics told me that they identified with Gulf migrants from South Asia, I thought that our backgrounds couldn't have been more different.

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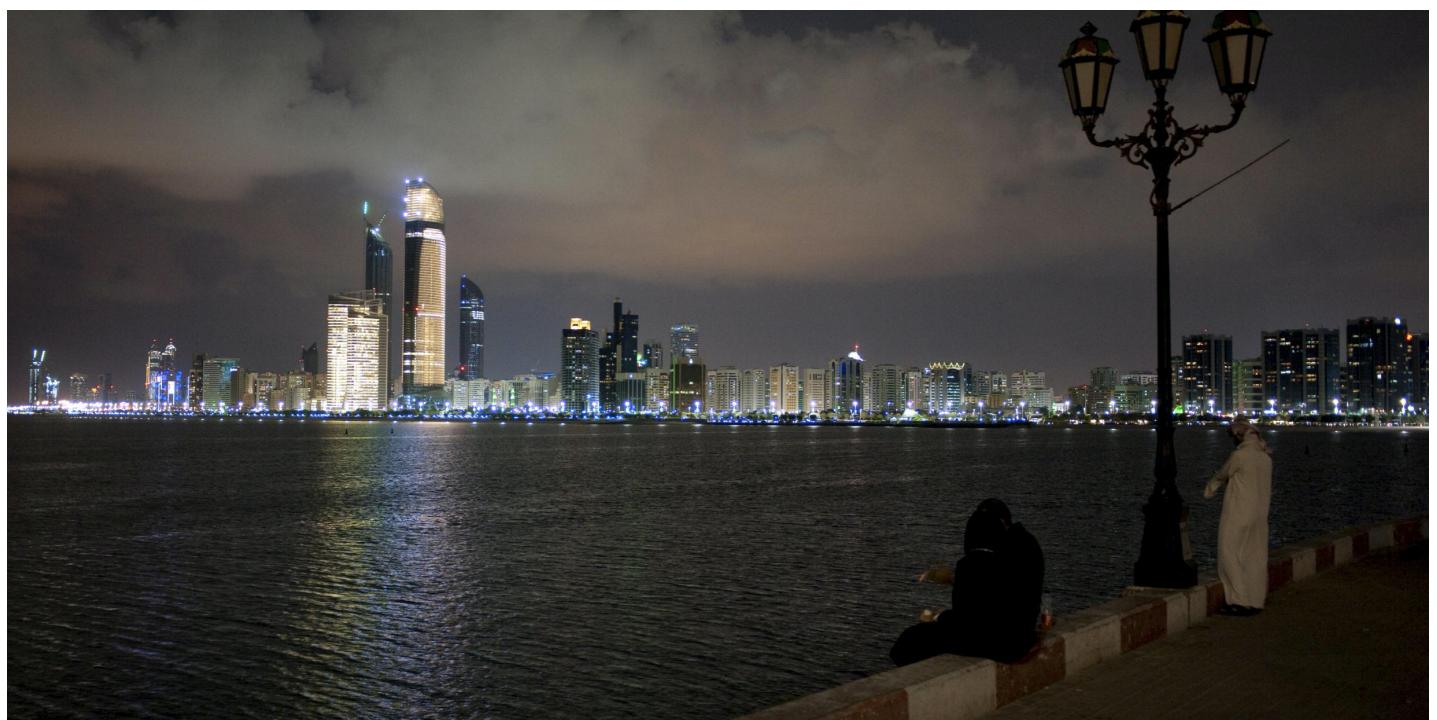
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But over the course of the evening, I began to understand why they related to someone like me. I was drawn to their stories, especially after I heard one of them talk about caring for her aging mother, who lived in a remote corner of the Iberian Peninsula. My own parents now live in Kerala after leaving Abu Dhabi, where they raised my sister and me; we must now keep an eye on them from afar. Slowly, as the dinner wound down, I saw why these scholars could embrace the word “temporary.” Like me, they treated cities as what they were, ephemeral spaces, places to pass through, where the first priority was gaining contractual employment, not finding a permanent home.

And yet my own life remained abstract to some of the interlocutors at my talk the next day. One scholar confidently told me that the Gulf model of immigration, where migrants have no prospect of gaining citizenship, was the model for the future; countries in the West should implement a similar system, attracting much-needed labor without giving immigrants the possibility of full inclusion. In his eyes, the Gulf model posed a more honest transaction between host country and worker, offering both immense economic opportunity.

Was I on board? Not completely, no. I am not an economist or a scholar. My experience, thanks to my family’s time in the Gulf, is more visceral, more personal. Yes, I would welcome a world with more porous economic borders. But as much as economists such as [Branko Milanovic](#) have praised the Gulf model’s potential to curb global inequality, I worry about consequences that can’t easily be quantified: the emotional toll that both long- and short-term employment have

on people who must accept the contract of transience. My family was more fortunate than most migrants in the Gulf in that my father made enough money to sponsor his wife and children to live with him in the UAE (many migrants from South Asia must leave their families behind, across the Arabian Sea). Even then, my family struggled with a peculiar kind of trauma, the abiding pain of absence, a separation that is incredibly hard to articulate and the reason I turned to fiction.



The skyline of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, December 2012

Jens Schwarz / *laif* / Redux

A MYTHICAL HOMELAND

My family has been on the move for several generations. My maternal grandparents used to live in Kenya, where my mother was raised. My parents moved from Kerala—first my father, then my mother—to the UAE in their early 20s. Eventually, my father found work there as an

engineer in a government-owned telecommunications firm. Unlike my elders, I wasn't uprooted from home in my youth; I spent most of my upbringing in Abu Dhabi. But the year I turned 20—an adult in the eyes of the UAE—the government canceled my residence visa. Under the terms of my father's visa, he wasn't permitted to sponsor an adult male. So I borrowed money and left Abu Dhabi for the United States, where I studied and worked until my mid-30s. As a result, on paper, I am an Indian citizen and a nervous holder of a U.S. green card, with temporary ties to the UAE and personal ties to Bulgaria, where my partner's family resides. In other words, I'm carrying on the family tradition of displacement, a kind of belonging I'm finding harder to sustain as I grow older.

The country where I have lived the longest, the UAE, is home to far more temporary migrants than citizens. Indians form the largest single demographic group in the country, and a considerable portion of those Indians—mostly men—come from Kerala, where I was born. There is no question that my immediate and extended family, as well as the state of Kerala in general, have all benefited from this economic arrangement. But the economy of remittances is built on absence and separation.

We lingered in the Gulf, bound to the memories of a homeland that seemed to grow out of reach.

As long as I can remember, my family has always missed reunions with our homeland, Kerala. My grandfather died in Abu Dhabi in 1983, just as he was in the process of retiring from his business and preparing to return to Kerala with me, his first grandchild. I was supposed to be raised by my grandparents in the house my grandfather built with the money he made working in Kenya, the house where my grandmother waited for him to return for close to a decade. She never completely recovered from the shock of his death. But she continued to wait, this time for my mother to leave the Gulf and come home to her. My grandmother passed away in 1997, two years before my mother's anticipated return to Kerala. With every death, my immediate family continued to linger in the Gulf, defeated by time, crippled by debt, and bound to the memories of a homeland that seemed to grow out of reach.

For my family, Kerala was for a long time a suspended space, parallel parked between a past my parents understood and a prosperous future they hoped for. When my sister and I were growing up in Abu Dhabi, Kerala was supposed to be Oz, a dreamworld where everything was right. That is what our parents, uncles, and aunts told us. Because we were children, we believed them. But as we got older, as we grew to understand and accept our ephemeral presence in the Gulf, we treated their rendition of Kerala as myth, not fact. Kerala belonged to our parents. They knew its shortcuts, how to read its language, Malayalam, and how to sidestep its petty politics and corruption. They had committed the addresses of extended family members to memory. But

they also began to romanticize the notion of return to the homeland, imagining they would fit right back into things as though Kerala were waiting for them, as though they'd never left.

In the 1980s, we would visit Kerala every two years during summer vacations. The gap between those trips grew longer when my father fell into debt and there wasn't enough money to get everyone on that plane. Finally, in 1998, after the death of my great-grandmother, the last living elder, the Kerala trips ceased for years. After the loss of so many relatives, my father stopped borrowing money to pay for the airfare home.

Kerala is no longer a mythical place for my parents; it's where they live. After more than 40 years in the Gulf, they finally left Abu Dhabi for good last year and returned "home" with barely a penny to their names. Sometimes I'm asked by well-meaning friends whether my family considered buying an apartment or a villa in Abu Dhabi, since the emirate permits non-nationals to acquire property for long-term lease under certain conditions. My family didn't have that kind of cash, I have to explain. For my 71-year-old father and my mother, in her 60s, it was cheaper to leave the country to which they had given so much of their lives than it was to stay.

"WAS IT WORTH IT?"

My mother was the one who spared my sister and me the guilt and

shame of asking our parents to return to Kerala. She had discovered how much it would cost us to buy medical insurance for them for the year—the fees had gone up—plus additional expenses to sponsor their residence visas, which my sister had handled since our father's retirement. In private, my sister and I agreed that it was better for our parents to return to Kerala with their health largely intact. If something happened in India, we reasoned, our dirhams would go further there than in the UAE. In Abu Dhabi, with only basic insurance available to our parents, little cash between the two of us, and negligible savings in the case of emergencies, we would inevitably walk an unpredictable financial tightrope.

In the act of leaving, my parents got rid of old furniture, chucked what couldn't be used, then shipped to Kerala the dining table and chairs, as well as other boxes of knickknacks, old crockery, and other items known only to my mother. My sister took the black papier-mâché Krishna, which was older than her. She found a smaller apartment for herself. I took the gold-plated Rhythm clock with the broken chime. But it was when my mother split most of her jewelry—the family heirlooms—between my sister and my partner that something in me finally broke. The gesture was confirmation that my mother and father were actually doing what had been imagined for decades: departing. I didn't know how to respond. It felt surprisingly routine. There was no rage or sobbing or drama or tantrums. We just went about our business, preparing for our respective absences from one another's lives.

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In the summer of 2018, as Abu Dhabi wallowed in haze and heat, my mother began to sort and discard her things. I kept her company at first, thinking I could help. But then I stopped. My mother was on autopilot. Feeling guilty because I wasn't really doing anything, I decided to write down recipes of dishes from Kerala that my mother had memorized, so that I could keep them with me—my grandmother had done something similar for my mother when they had parted decades earlier. I wrote nine recipes in a blue journal, and then I stopped. I asked my sister to take pictures of my parents as they sorted, chucked, and packed up nearly 45 years of life. She tried, and then she, too, stopped. My sister and I made a wish list of places we wanted to take our parents to before they left. We crossed one or two off the list and then, in the off-season, rented two rooms for one night on Sir Bani Yas Island, a boutique resort and reserve with access to a bird sanctuary, wildlife, and the sea. There, my family pretended we belonged to a narrative of prosperity, the kind of financial ease that

allowed you to congratulate yourself on a job well done, a life well lived.

Before they departed, my parents gave instructions to my sister and me: hold on to Grandma's letters, Grandpa's briefcase, those photo albums tracking our trajectory as a family in the Gulf. My father was 23 when he came to the UAE in 1972. My maternal grandfather, who didn't know my father, arrived there in 1975. At some point, every male relative from both sides of my family settled in the Gulf. Some stays were brief, for just a few years, but others were much longer. Back in Kerala, their wives and children, scattered across the state, learned how to live without them.

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When my parents finally left, they were encumbered with office files and binders my father refused to throw away. They carried old suitcases and new clothes. They also carried cheap trinkets, framed photographs, batteries, a large tin of Nido milk powder, Tang, Lipton tea bags, nuts, and toiletries—all items that my mother used to buy in bulk for relatives back when India's economy was comatose and that she continued to buy even as India prospered and changed.

My parents were among the last of our family to return to Kerala

from “Persia”—my grandmother’s word for the Gulf. They left without fuss, two weeks after their residence visas were canceled. I rode with them in a cab to the airport, with my father reminding me to check on my sister, my mother telling me to look after each other. They left without any of us sitting down as a family to speak frankly about what had happened to us in the Gulf. It is not as though we didn’t have time. Now I can’t move around Abu Dhabi without thinking of my parents and of their lives spent here without great means. I can’t help but see them everywhere and imagine what they relinquished to care for us.

As much as Abu Dhabi offered my parents a kind of material hope, the city broke their spirit. My father, then my mother, came to Abu Dhabi for the sake of immediate and extended family. They stayed for the sake of their children, to give us a shot at a better future. In the process, my parents lost their parents, my mother lost her family home, which was sold to help settle debts. And *my* family, what did *we* gain? I don’t know. We have never asked one another whether the gains outweigh the losses. Perhaps one day I will ask my tired parents, “Was it worth it?”

NEW WORDS

My sister and I, with the help of an end-of-service gratuity my father received from his employer in the UAE, built a house for our parents in Kerala, a house that they insisted must contain enough bedrooms

and bathrooms to host their children and the occasional guest. There are other houses like ours in Kerala, edifices that took years to build, filled with old people, built with Gulf cash. Homes that were built to symbolize achievement and welcome a younger generation far away. My family was truly lucky at least in one way. My desperate father played the Abu Dhabi Duty Free lottery for years. Then, in 2008, he actually won, paying off his debts with the winning lottery ticket.

These days, I'm convinced my mother is on a mission to replicate the house she lost—the one my grandfather built—buying things such as a cuckoo clock similar to the one my grandmother used to keep. Things don't turn out as we expect them to. Occasionally, I reflect on the lives of extended family members or people I went to school with. I have a cousin who doesn't know her father because she followed her spouse overseas as soon as her father returned from the Gulf. A gentle neighbor comes to sip tea and the occasional whiskey with my aging father to help relieve his boredom; when I sit with my dad, especially if he is tired, he tells me sometimes that he has few friends left in Kerala and that he doesn't know as many people there as he did in Abu Dhabi. When he says this with a chuckle, I say nothing before changing the subject. And there are my friends from high school, who are preparing to leave Abu Dhabi because other countries will have them. They seek the security of citizenship, a more permanent arrangement with a place, and better lives for their young children.



A migrant worker returned from the United Arab Emirates to Kerala, India, June 2014

Lee Hoagland/Redux

Malayalam, as rich a language as it is, does not possess the right words to express the trauma of distance, what happens to people when they return from the Gulf after having bartered their youth. According to economists, people from Kerala remit \$12.6 billion from abroad to their home state every year, fueling a growth rate of over 11 percent. But those figures can't count how many houses in Kerala built with Gulf money stand empty. Or whether there are old people in those houses, waiting for their children to return. Or how many children turned into adults without their fathers or their mothers. Whether wives knew what to do with their husbands after they returned or whether husbands wondered what their wives had been up to while they were in the Gulf. There is no count of how many men take up second families, how many wives keep lovers. Nor will the statistics explain why old men like my father returned paranoid, suspicious of the Kerala hustler, wary of the mythical burglar who targets only Gulf houses. Or why old women like my mother treat

their houses like trophies.

We need new words to define what people like my parents have become, how they produced children like me, boys with little allegiance to nation, state, or even their relatives. English needs new words, too, to explain such people, and people like me, because I am not an expat or a guest or a migrant or a contract worker. I am not a transnational, a global or world citizen, or a nomad. What I am is temporary, dispensable, a vulnerable state I was born into, and a condition I have normalized. I don't put down roots by default, and I refuse to love cities or people too much. I am always thinking about the next move wherever I go. As a result, I am frank and wear my heart on my sleeve. Like a machine, I can edit people out of my life when I am not around them anymore.

I have in many ways become a more clinical version of my father, the man on the move who works for a fee, on land he does not, will not, or cannot claim. The difference is that I was born into this. I am not sentimental about Kerala, or Abu Dhabi for that matter, or any other place I have lived and worked in and become fond of, including the United States. I am a worker and, for the most part, a legal resident or inhabitant on a timer, a cultural mercenary. Yet I will be the first person to admit there are consequences to this arrangement, that money cannot return lost time or the dead. Like my mother and my father before me, I worry about something very basic, that the people who gave birth to me will die in my absence, always assuming I was going to return.

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