

**MEHRAN KAMRAVA & ZAHRA BABAR, eds., *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., Ltd., 2012). Pp. 242. \$40.000 cloth. ISBN 9781849042109.**

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In the months following the release of *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf*, media outlets (mostly from the UK) once again turned an eye to the conditions and circumstances of laboring migrants in the Gulf States. There seems to be no apparent connection between the release of the book and the attention being paid to laboring conditions. Rather, this is the latest spate of attention paid to the Gulf over the past few decades. Hardly the darling of scholars or journalists through most of the twentieth century, the region comprising the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has, since the invasion and liberation of Kuwait in 1991, intermittently and with increasing frequency drawn the attention of the rest of the world. And, labor migration, migrants, as well as the practices and policies through which their lives are shaped are among the topics frequently interrogated in global conversations about the Gulf.

The round of discussion generated in the later months of 2013 may be attributed to the recognition that Qatar's plans to host the 2022 World Cup necessarily entail the continued use of foreign contract labor coupled with continued concern by international humanitarian organizations about reported abuses of labor in the region. It is not unusual that major sporting news and events bring important political, social and human questions to the attention of new audiences. It is at just such a moment, that a general reader on the labor migration in the Gulf can be useful providing context, chronology, and nuanced discussion to balance the brevity common in news media accounts of migration and its constituents in the Gulf.

The contract (and informal) labor of non-citizens is an important and well-entrenched feature of the economies of the Gulf

and foreign, non-citizen residents an established feature of Gulf cities and societies. Foreigners comprise more than 50 percent of the workforce in all of the GCC states and as much as 80 percent of the overall population in cities such as Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The high ratio of citizens to non-citizens creates circumstances and raises challenges for the range of stakeholders from laboring migrants to policy makers, from recruitment agents to human rights observers, from local citizens to sending communities. These circumstances also suggest the importance of the region for the readership of this journal and our understanding of migration in the twenty-first century. Students and scholars of other points in the global flow of people will find much of interest in the scholarship on the Gulf.

Scholars of the region recognize that their field is still relatively new and far from comprehensive. Individual scholars have examined particular issues, communities, processes, or locales, and in the last decade, a network of scholars and venues for collaboration have begun to bring these scholars and their work into conversations moving us toward a more comprehensive, multi-disciplinary understanding of migration through the Gulf. *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* is the result of one such initiative and representative to the growing scholarly literature within the study of Gulf migration.

*Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* is the result of a series of working group meetings convened by the Center for International and Regional Studies of Georgetown in Doha, Qatar between 2010 and 2012. The book is a collection of papers written by a small group of scholars who are representative of, some of them leaders among, a community of scholars who have, like the international media, shifted their attention and honed their focus on the Gulf since the 1990s. The working group included anthropologists, sociologists, demographers, and political scientists and each paper is supported by empirical data derived, in some cases, from considerable ethnographic observation, interviews and spatial analyses. Some of the authors, specifically Ahmed, Bristol-Rhys, Gardner and Mahdavi, have been studying in the Gulf for a significant number of years, conducting ethnographic and survey research in more than one country and collaborating with others in the same field or related areas through the increasing number of academic conferences and organizations forming in Europe and North America. Whereas Breeding, P. Osella, C. Osella, and Williams et al. bring a similar depth of experience and knowledge from their cumulative research within the sending countries of South Asia. The remaining authors, Medicoff and Martin, while newer to the study of

the region, provide a fresh perspective from their disciplinary interests in political and policy contexts whether domestic, regional and/or global.

It is the breadth of disciplinary perspective and methodological approach and their application to circumstances in both sending and receiving countries that shapes the unique contribution of this volume. While each piece stands on its own, and could easily be read for specific purposes, the entirety of the collection paints a complex image of migration and migrants' lives, an image where Nepal blurs into Qatar, Kerala into Dubai, migrants and families into employers, policies, and states. The research foci of the papers both include and move beyond the common topics of the economic and human rights implications of this migration; and, the papers as a collective commentary remove migrants from the oversimplified role of victims and interrogates their lives and the migration cycle as it reaches back into sending communities and impacts subsequent choices and destinations.

Ethnographic research on particular migrant populations and/or migration pathways has been an important part of the growing literature on the Gulf and is well represented, perhaps even dominant, in this volume. The ethnographic accounts are diverse with Ahmed speaking from her research among household workers in Kuwait, Bristol Rhys from a spatial analysis/grammar of migrants in Abu Dhabi; and Mahdavi from within the informal economy in Dubai. Gardner, like the Osellas, expands the vantage point to bridge sending and receiving communities in his investigation following specific migrants from Doha back to Nepal. Filippo and Carolyn Osella bring their incredibly nuanced understanding of Kerala's long-standing and complex connections to the Gulf into an analysis of the role of "middle men" in the migration process, specifically with reference to the articulation of two distinct models of middling. The ethnography in all of these essays is well-grounded and theoretically informed, revealing much about the migrants, and providing a sample of the ethnography of the region. The interested reader would be well advised to seek out other publications by these authors and their colleagues.

Several of the papers provide historical background to anchor the ethnography. Filippo and Caroline Osella explain the historical links among the Indian Ocean countries and the longstanding interaction between peoples of the Gulf and Kerala. The key interlocutor in Ahmed's essay is an Indian national who migrated to Kuwait in 1968. These examples provide historical depth often missing in the portrayals of rapid economic development in the Gulf. Bristol

Rhys' discussion of the urban geography of migrants in Abu Dhabi follows a tradition of earlier works on the social and spatial diversity in twentieth-century Gulf Cities that described Sohar, Kuwait City, Unayza, and Doha in the 1980s and 1990s. While her examination of Abu Dhabi contributes to the recognition of differences among the Gulf Cities, Bristol-Rhys' reading of Abu Dhabi suggests that spatial differentiation remains an important technology for managing and making sense of social difference in twenty-first-century Abu Dhabi.

Three of the papers in this volume suggest new possibilities and methods for connecting research in the destination country with research in the sending country. On a micro-level, Gardner (who is otherwise known for pioneering quantitative research with large samples of laborers) worked with a dozen South Asian men laboring in Doha and traveled to Nepal to interview their families and other members of their communities of origin. Flipping the direction of inquiry and enlarging the sample size, Williams et al. used a randomly sampled survey in the Chitwan Valley of Nepal to contact the absent members of their survey households. Both papers illustrate the importance of family and community in the decision-making and economic processes of migration. Filippo and Caroline Osella similarly follow the flows of migrants between Kerala and the Gulf as they provocatively, and with fascinating detail, explore the articulation of distinct models/ideologies of networking and connections common in the two societies (Dalal, or middlemen, in India and Wasta, or connections, the Gulf). Martin's paper on collaborative efforts to address migrants' rights, such as those initiated in the Abu Dhabi dialogue, asks the reader to look forward – into future possibilities.

Given the holistic objectives of this project and the apparent influence the working group discussions had upon each of the authors, most of these papers bring the socio-cultural detail into conversation with policy challenges. Breeding, Mahdavi and Mednicoff all offer intriguing and insightful discussions of this relationship. Breeding writes of the challenges to regulating the transnational processes of recruitment. Mahdavi draws upon Manuel Castell's concept of "perverse integration" to explain the trajectories into the informal economy and to problematize the definitions of trafficking common in policy and third sector discourse (100). Mednicoff provides a similarly sophisticated response to the seemingly simple question of how the migrant presence has influenced legal reform in the Gulf States. He demonstrates how the tension between contrasting development narratives—those internal to the Gulf and those held by the

international community – provides a context in which the Gulf states have chosen to respond to migration challenges with actions that do not indicate a strong policy change (212).

Mednicoff's juxtaposition of contrasting narratives resonates with the Osellas' investigation of the contrasting models of networking to suggest an emerging recognition of the super structural features of diversity and transnationalism in the Gulf. In fact, in the opening essay of this volume, Ahmed reminds us that the Gulf and migration through the Gulf cannot be reduced to labor, neither at the level of everyday lived experience nor that of thought and ideology. She warns her colleagues and her readers not to become entangled in our own tropes, particularly those that reduce the lives of migrants to their labor.

The volume sets out to “present a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of migration in the Persian Gulf” (12). In this, it succeeds. The understanding of migration to the Gulf represented in this collection, is far more interdisciplinary, far-reaching geographically and theoretically informed than the understanding held a decade ago. Nonetheless, the authors themselves recognize that significant gaps in the research on this topic and region continue to plague us and that continued scholarly attention is warranted. Bristol Rhys points out the need for situated analyses that differentiate the states of the Gulf (60) and Mednicoff calls for comparisons in time and space (214). Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE are more commonly the topic of research than Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Particular populations are rarely, or only in passing, considered. We know far too little about the large numbers of non-Gulf Arabs living and working in the Gulf, or those employed in professional and service positions. Household workers, too, remain a challenge to reach with common research methods.

Overall, this volume is a superb reader on migration to the Gulf. Beginners will find much in the rich empirical detail. Scholars of other migration flows will find points of entry and comparison. And, those of us working and researching the Gulf will see much advancement in our field and still much more to understand.