

**ANDREA WRIGHT, *Between Dreams and Ghosts: Indian Migration and Middle Eastern Oil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 288. \$90.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper. ISBN 9781503629516.**

REVIEWED BY NELIDA FUCCARO, Professor of Middle Eastern History, New York University Abu Dhabi, email: [nelida.fuccaro@nyu.edu](mailto:nelida.fuccaro@nyu.edu)



*Between Dreams and Ghosts* is a very welcome contribution to the study of South Asian labor migration to the Gulf and to recent scholarship that has challenged the erasure of workers from historical and contemporary accounts of the Middle Eastern oil industry. Wright's book is a multisided ethnography that covers the migrants' journey from the Indian subcontinent to the Gulf and back, also engaging with labor recruiters, oil managers, and Indian government officials. By bringing ethnography, archival research, oral history, and social media analysis into close alignment, *Between Dreams and Ghosts* dissects the overlapping and competing visions and aspirations articulated at the different levels of the labor chain that binds the Indian state to a complex network of recruiters and to the workforce. In this respect, this book tells two sides of the same story. On the one hand, how the government, the market, energy firms, and contractors see (or would like to see) workers as rational economic actors, self-styled entrepreneurs contributing to the Indian national brand. On the other hand, how workers who are disadvantaged in India—particularly Muslims and low caste—are able to develop in the Gulf a personhood that centers around notions of responsibility, and social and familial obligation, and a work ethic that construes their overseas experience as one of freedom, allowing them to craft alternative visions for the future.

In part 1, Wright emphasizes how migration is regulated by actors—most notably the government and recruiting agents—that are seemingly driven by neoliberal policies and aspirations, particularly after the Bharatiya Janata Party's consolidation of power in 2014 under

the banner of “minimizing government, maximizing governance” (42). Yet, while showing the increasing privatization and commodification of the unskilled and semi-skilled labor force, the author successfully complicates the picture by pointing at two key systemic tensions. The first is between the pressure to liberalize government intervention in migration affairs and the resilience of policies geared towards the protection of the so-called “vulnerable Indian” in order to advance the credibility of the Indian brand abroad. The second tension is embedded in the demands of the labor agents on the payroll of the government. While asking for more state intervention to train workers in basic skills, these agents also advocate more free market and *laissez-faire* policies to be competitive on the global labor market, particularly against their Pakistani and Filipino counterparts (47–48).

Part 2 of the book articulates how individuals make sense of migration through their telling of the dreams and ghost stories referred to in the title, the essence of what Wright defines as their poetics of migration. She sees the poetics as evidence that “capitalism creates value from non-capitalist value regimes and that local practices and value systems shape global capitalism” (91). In these stories, the personal and the political coalesce through the migrants’ dreams of modernity, wealth, and empowerment back home, and their grappling with the ghosts of customs and obligation as a legacy of traditional social life. When likened to a Hindu temple (*mandir*), an oil rig under construction in Abu Dhabi becomes a space for self-empowerment and a signifier of an alternative Hindu-driven national identity. Stories of buying golden jewelry for the dowry of female members of the family makes gold akin to oil, a connective “kinship substance” (97) that helps to fulfill family and social obligations in India.

In part 3, the author focuses on the managerial practices adopted by energy providers to discipline the workforce: from isolation in workcamps and strike control to safety regulations that are routinely used to mitigate corporate risk. Interestingly, Wright shows how workers at Gulf sites also engage in self-disciplining, a process which she defines as “neo-liberalism from below” following Verónica Gago<sup>1</sup> (174). This act of self-discipline mirrors a discipline of personal cultivation that is promoted in neoliberal India, following an upper caste Hindu practice, which is shaping the image of the contemporary national entrepreneur.

From the perspective of extant literature on Gulf migration, the book’s focus on the Indian government is particularly welcome as a relatively little understood historical and contemporary actor. Adding

historical depth, in chapter 1, Wright convincingly argues that contemporary legislation regulating the movement of Indian citizens is the legacy of the British colonial era, more specifically of provisions put in place to control the global circulation of indentured labor across the empire. In fact, the book's focus on legacies and continuities is one of its most notable features, as illustrated when the author argues that the contemporary labor market constitutes the continuation of the historical commodification of Indian exports. This is a story "from mangoes to men" as aptly illustrated by one of Wright's interviewees, a recruiting agent based in Mumbai whose family had traded mangoes to the Gulf in the late British colonial period and switched to manpower in the 1970s (16-17).

The author is also particularly keen to disabuse the myth of Gulf exceptionalism—for instance, in relation to the *kafalah* as a system of labor sponsorship which is often equated to modern slavery. She argues that the *kafalah* has resulted from the very contemporary necessity to manage carbon production at the global scale, rather than being embedded in the constitution of Gulf societies and in that of the rentier state (139-42). Here she perhaps overlooks the fact that the twentieth-century socioeconomic and political architecture of the region was itself the byproduct of the peculiar combination of oil and empire. The author also seems to suggest that a neoliberal reading of Gulf governance and regional development goes against received wisdom, again perhaps underestimating neoliberal critiques embedded in much of the literature produced in the last decade or so.

In dealing with migrants' lives and the biopolitics of the Indian state at a granular level, *Between Dreams and Ghosts* does an excellent job at uncovering the agency embedded in labor migration networks, often concealed by a mounting neoliberal corporate logic that naturalizes both labor inequalities and state intervention. It is a pity that often the oil industry in the Gulf and Middle East remains in the background. This reader has found it difficult to grasp what is distinctive (or undistinctive) about oil and energy's corporate mechanisms in the vast sea of the Indian labor market. More context on oil companies and energy providers could have helped; it is only provided towards the end of the monograph (164ff.) where the role played by the so-called supermajors (formerly the Seven Sisters) in the upstream and downstream sector of the Gulf oil industry is explained. But perhaps it is just the book's title that raises the readers' expectations, an indication of the ambitious breadth of this monograph.

In sum, and despite some shortcomings, *Between Dreams and Ghosts* is a highly readable and deeply felt volume which will have a long shelf life, and it marks an important and original contribution to the increasingly crowded space of studies of labor and migration between the Gulf and the Indian subcontinent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Verónica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).