

**Tamil Muslims in the Gulf-A study on Migration**

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The enterprising Muslims of Tamil country were masters of maritime commerce and allied activities right from the inception and spread of Islam from 8-9th Centuries C.E., on the east coast of south India. They had also established trade and social network across the seas. Due to economic reasons many migrated to the south east and west Asian countries in search of better opportunities. Such migration continued for centuries in that they were attracted by the new opportunities in the Gulf Countries during the first quarter of 20th Century.

A number of people right from the labour class to high skilled professionals migrated to these countries. They had brought prosperity to their families and as well to the nations on both sides. There are many successful stories. For achieving this they had been put in to many ordeals, lose, hazards and challenges. But still the migrations continue to the Gulf countries. It is estimated that there are about 3,50,000 migrant (Tamil Muslim) workers in GCC countries. The paper is a discussion on the various aspect on the subject based on authentic data.

Key Words: Gulf Counties, Emigration, Migration, Skilled professionals, Labourers, Home country, Expatriate, Labour camp, Remittance, Exploitation, Wages, Psycho-Socio, problems.

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The Muslims of Tamil Nadu are enterprising and always mobile. The spread of Islam in the 7th century C.E., paved way for the emergence of this strong trading community in the east coast of the peninsular India. After the birth the Islam, the Arab maritime traders came here as Arab Muslims and spread their influence where they had traditional trade contact. These merchant missionaries took efforts to preach the doctrines Islam to the people here, and many of them willingly embraced Islam. Some of the Arab Muslims who stayed here for a longer period married the local women. The children born from such matrimonial alliance together with the converts from other religions, inaugurated the Tamil Muslim society on the east coast of South India right from the eighth century, C.E. Muslim colonies sprang up. They followed the suit of their progenitors the Arabs, and concentrated in oceanic commerce and other maritime activities. They undertook voyages for long distance places and established trade contact in the port towns in the Persian Gulf as well and carried commodities that were in demand in the western marts and their sojourn continued for centuries till about 1900 and thus the Tamil Muslims by tradition had an affinity towards the Arab lands¹.

The people in the maritime ventures among the Tamil Muslims, were ship owners and maritime traders and were also experts in a number of related maritime activities and they provided employment to thousands of people on the east coast. They lost their economic fortunes to the competitions, economic and technological superiority of the European trading companies in India in the 19th century and went in search of better opportunities for

livelihood and started migrating to South East Asian countries, Cyclone and Burma and being continued to this day. There are a number of successful stories on the people who migrated to these countries.

The fondness mobility imbibed in the Tamil Muslim community was attracted by the new economic opportunities open in the Gulf Countries and they were also included among the early migrants to these countries from about 1930. The shortage of man power had been endemic by 1960s in all the GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council) – Saudi Arabic, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – for all categories of work from professionals such as to doctors, engineers, architects, secretarial personal to semi skilled workers such as craftsmen, artisans, drivers, technical workers and unskilled workers, needed in construction sites, farms, shops and households². The Tamil Muslims readily availed these opportunities and went in pursuit of the new economic opportunities and the early birds got bigger worms. But the migration and related matters to the Gulf countries, with regard to people to Tamil Nadu in general and the Muslims in particular, has not been studied adequately as that of the Kerala counterparts. At times the migration of the Muslims and their hard labour and their remittances are being misunderstood and even distorted. This paper is an attempt to elucidate a few facts on the subject.

From about 1970, the Gulf countries caught the imagination of the younger generation in Tamil Muslim society. The youth were ready to sacrifice their educations even at the secondary level. Hundreds in every town prepared themselves to fetch the fruits. Most of them went through the help of friends and relatives. About 0 percent went through recruiting agents and individual agents. Those who migrated through the appropriate legal process got a standard labour contract. In 1975, the cost of travel to the GCC countries was about 3000 rupees only including visa charges and agent's commission. The process of migration picked up and majority of the migrants were semiskilled and unskilled labour class. The attractive packages in the migrated lands increased the cost of travel and in the long run and it went up. According to a statistic of 2015, a migrant had to spend an average of rupees 76127 and at times it went up to a lakh of rupees. Agency houses had sprang up even in small villages. The main recruiting agency was at Mumbai and spread its tentacles far and wide. Those who do not have sufficient cash sold their landed properties and jewels of the woman folk or obtained loan at exorbitant terms. After remitting the required amount to the agent- middle man- they were waiting anxiously to fly to their dream lands. After waiting for some time locally, groups of youth from villages travelled to Mumbai to be in touch with the main recruiting agency for months together for getting visa. A vast majority among them had achieved the goal and many had to return home unsuccessful and also lost their money. Such sufferings of job seekers did not deter the fresh entrants and thousands of people were migrating from various parts of Tamil Nadu. The hard earned money of the early unskilled workers brought fortunes to their families and their sons also migrated in succession, of course these young people with a higher educational qualification as professionals for white collar jobs and they were well paid³. The coastal districts of Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram, Thirunelveli and South Arcot were on the lead in migration to the GCC countries. There was also migration from other parts of Tamil Nadu.

At present it is estimated that there are approximately about 3,50,000 Tamil Muslim migrant workers in all the GCC countries. But the number may go still higher. The correct data could not be arrived at and the variations are caused because many of the migrants had not registered in any departments of India or GCC government agencies. They are all in the category of domestic workers like house mats, cooks, gardeners and coolie labourers. The



reports on Indian migration says that ‘about 17 categories of persons have been exempted from emigrations clearance and are placed under the ‘emigration clearance not required’ (ECNR) category as per the Emigration Act 1983. Official figures only capture the flow of immigrant labour that fall within the ECR category⁴. Hence the problem in computing the correct data about the migrant workers persists.

Demand for the white collar jobs increased from 1980s in all the GCC countries and migrations of this category of workers also increased. They were well paid in government departments and private undertakings. They were allowed to bring their families with them to the country of work. The religious identity of the Muslims did not confer them any special status in that they were also not granted citizenship in any of the GCC country except Oman. In general, life is comfortable to the professional and white collars in the Gulf.

Semiskilled and unskilled workers continue about 75 percent of the total number of expatriates among the Tamil Muslims in the GCC countries. Low skilled category of workers such as house maids, cooks and laborers for construction works etc., were in need to the growing industrial and domestic sector. Hence this category of workers migrated in large numbers. Youngsters are willing to work even for meager sums. Thus the unskilled and semiskilled workers have a high rate of turnover as they work for a short period of contract and had to return home. However a large portion does manage to return under new contract after a period of not less than one year.

A peep in to living condition of the migrant workers in the Gulf will go to show that how the unskilled and semiskilled workers who work in infrastructural and other development projects live under miserable conditions. They are accommodated in crowded small rooms in labour camps. Kitchen and sanitation facilities are inadequate. Their condition in the working place is also pitiable. Difficult circumstances such as inclement weather, inability to participate in social and recreational activities, lack of adequate medical facilities, long period of separation from their families and dear ones and the consequent emotional deprivations have been known to wreck their lives⁵. Besides these workers are subjected to several forms of exploitations by the recruiting agents and prospective employers. Confiscation of travel documents and passports, refusal to give the assured employment, nonpayment of wages, undue deductions from the meager wage, negative legal rights to seek remedy for complaints etc., are very common ordeals met by many workers. There are also cases of cheating and those without proper travel documents are detained on arrival to the country of work and deported to the place of origin, resulting in heavy loss of money. The migrant workers are not protected by any local law in the GCC countries⁶. At times the poor migrant workers become victims as ignorant carries of smuggled goods and thus their life and families affected beyond recovery.

An interesting news items from Kuwait, the richest GCC country in the year 2018 will not be out of place here. Kuwait is the first country in the Gulf to set a minimum wage for its hundreds and thousands of domestic servants and it has listed the minimum salary as 60 Kuwait Dinars (\$198) a month from July 2016. But in practice as the Human Right Watch have reported, there are wide spread abuse of this law including non-payment of wages. For instance the plight of over 3000 Indian workers of Kharafi National Company in Kuwait could be cited. The salary of the workers had not been paid for one year. The company has declared lockout. The workers have resorted to protests. Among them there is considerable number of Tamil Muslims also. The visas of many employees have expired. The passports were with the company. They could not leave the country. They were living in the fear of legal action for staying illegally in that country. With the efforts of the social activists and the

government of India, the Kuwait government had initiated some sympathetic action to overcome the situation and a general amnesty was announced by the Kuwait government to protect the workers of the said company. More such cases are also reported from Kuwait⁷ and as well as from many other GCC countries also.

The professional and skilled and well paid migrants keep in close contact with the families in India. They go home for visits whenever possible they are able to maintain social contact with similarly placed compatriots and nationals in higher level social cultural activities through various associations. Their associations have established large number of schools for the children of the expatriates. Importance is given for the study of Tamil language⁸.

The expatriates associations are set up among the Tamil Muslim workers based on their place of origin. They contribute their mite for from their hard earned money for the welfare of the community at large. They undertake literary, religious and other social activities in the country where they work and help their fellow brethren in the alien lands who suffer on extraordinary situations. They arrange literary meets, religious lectures, tours etc. They never forget their homeland. Guided by compassion and love for fellow human being they endeavor to address poverty, health and educational problems and offer sustainable solution that enables individuals and society to live with dignity. They support initiatives that promote economic and social justice. The expatriate associations offer scholarships to the poor students in the educational institutions in various places in Tamilnadu, to peruse their education and also help the poor and destitute women and aged people and so on. Hundreds of poor students continue their higher education with such liberal assistance in various grades. A number of poor women get the matrimonial prospects with their assistance. They rush with liberal donations during the time of national calamities and disasters. Their efforts to alleviate the sufferings the people affected in the recent cyclone, flood and rains in Tamil Nadu are well known. They support the educational institutions and help for building their infrastructure. Alumni of schools and colleges who are employed in the GCC countries patronize the respective institutions and they attend to the needs of their alma mater. There are many examples of this kind almost in all the towns of Tamil Muslim settlements⁹. As an unique feature of educational service of the expatriate Tamil Muslims, the AIMAN – The Indian Muslim Association of Abu Dhabi – is managing an Arts and Science college for woman at Tiruchirappalli, where quality education is offered to about 1000 women, from educationally and socially backward sector irrespective of religion. This is a commendable effort in the history of the Tamil Muslim expatriates¹⁰.

It will be seen that the majority of migrant workers face a number of difficulties at various levels. But to them “sweet are the uses of adversity”. Yes, almost all of them prefer to continue this life. No doubt that they have worked for the economic development of the country of work and the sweat of each and every migrant is mingled in building the strength of the respective countries. At the same time it has given them a social mobility in their home town. It has given them the chance to climb up the hierarchical ladder economically with social standing. Their families live in comfort. Their children are given good education and thus shaping the future generation. There are many successful stories around warranting the attention of the scholars migration study. The remittance of Indian expatriates in to India is very important for the economic development and in our nation building. In that the share of the Tamil Muslims is also considerable. However the expatriate Tamil Muslims often lack planning the future course on return to the homeland after some years. They spend lavishly on social function and invest the whole earning in building houses etc. Many people

after their return seek some employment here at a minimum wage. Hence they have to plan schemes for self employment ventures, farming etc., with adequate own funds¹¹. Further long separation of a man from the family for long period brings mental stress and psychological effect on his wife which has to be addressed in the proper sense.

However many challenges are ahead to the migrant workers in GCC countries as at present. The economic slump arising out of fluctuation in crude price and simmering geopolitical tension in the Persian Gulf region are sending shock waves to the migrant workers. This has resulted in pay cuts. Arabisation in GCC countries is eroding the job opportunities of the migrant workers. Emigration to Gulf countries has come down. The remittance of the Indian migrant workers has fallen from 4,38,336 Crores (2013-14) to 3,66,593 Crores (2016-17). This will affect the house hold consumption. The rupee could come under pressure. The Indian and State governments will be burdened with providing jobs to those who immigrated to home country and this situation will disturb the economic stability of the nation. Though all these of aspects are common to all the Indian migrant workers, the Tamil Muslims will also be affected by this¹².

Thus the Tamil Muslim migrant workers, as other migrant workers in the State, have contributed their due share in nation building with their hard earned remittances. They have also bestowed their attention for the uplift of the poor and under privileged and their services for the society during disasters have to be recorded faithfully in the history of Tamil Nadu.

However the status and matters relating to the migrant workers in Tamil Nadu, so also the Tamil Muslims, is not studied adequately and await the attention of the researchers and State government departments. Scholars should undertake detailed and intensive study on the Tamil Muslims' migration to the Gulf countries and such study will bring many new facts to the contemporary social and economic history of Tamil Nadu.

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