

Memories and Narrations of “Nations” Past: Accounts of Early Migrants from Kerala in the Gulf in the Post-Oil Era

M.H. Ilias

This paper investigates a set of narratives revolving around the experiences of early post-oil migrants from Kerala to the Gulf States. These narratives take different forms such as individuals’ spoken memories, recollections, perspectives, and narrative accounts of events and experiences. Their themes range widely from the simple renditions of experience of travel to their subjective account of the history of nation-building in the host countries. As witnesses to many seminal events in the history of the Gulf states, memories of migrants from Kerala must not be merely seen as personal storytelling about the past. Rather, they could be interpreted as a collective effort to retell history in an alternative way. They are particularly useful as they open a window into the early South Asian ordinary migrants’ perceptions about a plethora of historical events, such as post-colonial transition of Gulf societies, state formation, and nation-building. Such narratives are generally absent from the “standard” records of history of the region.

Introduction

Migration of people from Kerala, South India, to the Arab Gulf region has generated various forms of oral histories and local narratives, both in the migrant’s host countries and in Kerala. Narratives revolving around the early post-oil migration that began in the 1940s possess especially interesting dimensions. The primary intention of this article is to analyse the testimonials and personal narratives of some of the early migrants from Kerala to the Gulf States.

Though the post-oil migration of South Indians to the Gulf began as early as the 1940s, the 50s and 60s witnessed a massive influx of “undocumented” labourers into the region. This period coincided with the incipient phase of state formation in the Gulf region.¹ Increased demand for labour in the newly emerging oil-based economies was largely met by the arrival of workers from various parts of the Indian subcontinent on illegal passenger fleets,² while recruitments through formal channels were limited and remained mainly in the hands of agencies assigned by Western oil companies. While migrants from urban areas like Mumbai relied on formal means, those from coastal villages of Kerala and Gujarat tapped into the possibilities offered by the historical

¹ S. Priyadershini, “Airlifted from Kuwait,” *Hindu*, 27 January 2016, accessed 1 November 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/Airlifted-from-Kuwait/article14022775.ece>.

² Ian J. Seccombe, “Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf: Evolution and Characteristics 1920-1950,” *Bulletin of British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 10, no.1 (1983): 3-20.

commercial links between these regions and the Arabian Peninsula.³ They boarded vessels of Gujarati and Sindhi merchants who came to South Asian ports to procure goods and subsequently transported them to the Persian Gulf ports of Dubai, Muscat, and Bahrain. It must be noted that these movements, undertaken secretly at the risk of the migrants and merchants, did not face any legal sanctions in either the originating or receiving countries.⁴

Typically, the early migrants had neither educational qualification nor jobs ensured in the host countries at the onset of their journey. They lacked proper travel documents and proof of identity.⁵ The first generation of migrants from Kerala, therefore, mainly included uneducated and unskilled labourers who had found in migration a solution to problems such as unemployment and poverty.⁶ This pattern of migration continued up to the mid-1970s, the period when the receiving countries began to formalise and institutionalise their immigration policies through the enactment of a new set of laws.⁷ This article places special attention to the accounts of people who resorted to “unlawful” means of migration.

The narratives investigated in this piece manifest themselves in various forms including individual’s spoken memories, personal recollections, perspectives, and narrative accounts of events and experiences. The study permeates a broad range of memories, which reflect the lived experiences of early Kerala migrants. The underlying themes range widely from simple renditions of experiences of travel to subjective accounts of the history of development of infrastructure, evolution of bureaucracy and nation-building in host countries. The focus of the testimonials presented here revolve mainly around two broad themes: traumatic experiences of travel from their home countries to the region and life in the Arab Gulf states. While these themes are typical of the life stories of first generation post-oil Gulf migrants from South and South-East Asia, the eastern Gulf states, and eastern Africa, some narratives contain culturally specific references, as well as atypical elements.

The post-oil economic development in the Persian Gulf brought a huge demand for expatriate workers throughout the region. The recruitment policy in the initial phase was strongly influenced by traditional structures.⁸ Local Arabs, along with slaves from the African continent, were employed in large numbers. They mainly worked as construction workers engaged in building roads, as well as in accommodation facilities at the oil camps.⁹

³ Edward Simpson, *Muslim Society and the Western Indian Ocean: The Seafarers of Kachchh* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4, 6.

⁴ Interview with Alawi Haji, one of the early migrants who moved to the UAE in the early 1960s, held on 26 May 2014 in Kerala.

⁵ M. A. Rahman, *Pravasiyude Yudhangal* (Kochi: Saikatham Books, 2014), 2-4.

⁶ B. A. Prakash, “Impact of Foreign Remittances: A Case Study of Chavakkad Village in Kerala,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 27 (1978): 3210-3215.

⁷ Secombe, “Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf,” 13-20.

⁸ Ian J. Seacombe and R. I. Lawless, “Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-50,” *International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (Autumn, 1986): 548-574.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 549.

The demand, however, soon outstripped the local supply, compelling oil companies to turn to other nationalities in order to meet their labour needs.¹⁰ Yemen, Iran, and Iraq emerged as the major suppliers of labour in the early 1930s. However, the increase in the number of Iranian labourers, who generally belonged to the Shiite denomination, caused serious religious concerns for the local rulers by the end of 1930s.¹¹ From that period onwards, the supply of migrant workers was not only influenced by their immediate availability, but also affected by political considerations and preferences.¹² Indians under British rule were the major beneficiaries of this change as the British administration in the Gulf preferred the employment of Indians over Iranians, whom they regarded as potential Iran's agents that might further this state's claims over some of the disputed territories in the region.¹³ Subsequently, the demand for Indian labourers grew to the extent that even "undocumented" migrants who had resorted to illegal immigration channels were absorbed in the labour market without much hassle.¹⁴ Oil companies either directly opened recruiting offices in Bombay or deployed agents to the region in order to recruit skilled and semi-skilled personnel on their behalf.¹⁵

A formal complaint from C. M. Nair, an employee of the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), is believed to be the first document that provides a detailed account of the conditions of early post-oil era migrants from Kerala.¹⁶ The document, which was received by the Ministry of External Affairs in India in 1948, concerns a compensation claim by C. M. Nair from the company:

It is commonplace to assert that the condition of Indian workers in the oil companies in the Persian Gulf is most unsatisfactory. The Government of India is, however, not in a strong position to take remedial action because we are ought to serve in these companies of our own free will and subscribe to a contract which places the company in a strong position [...] [T]he real reason why we suffer these degrading conditions is the economic pressure at home despite uncomfortable employment.

Due to the specific nature of immigration during this period, employment contracts were mostly unilateral, thus granting employers arbitrary and extensive powers to dismiss workers on the slightest pretext. Moreover, workers found themselves in poor living and working conditions. For example, Malayali employees of Gulf business firms and factories, in addition to inadequate housing and poor access to medical facilities,

¹⁰ Ibid., 555.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. and M. H. Ilias, "South Asian Labour Crisis in Dubai and the Prospects of Indian Policy in the Arab Gulf Region," *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4, no. 1-2 (2010): 74-102.

¹³ Seacombe, "Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf," 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Seacombe and Lawless, "Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-50," 261.

¹⁶ JS Mehta to E. A. Wing Ministry of EA & CR. U. O. No. D 2338/48 on 27 July, 1948, Treatment of Employees in Bahrain, F 18(27) AWT/48. and F.N. 18-AWT/48 Vide S. No. 1 and 5.

also faced racial discrimination and unequal compensation for their work. Nair writes, “the employees from the European countries were paid twice as much as an Indian doing the same job. The raw young Americans, for instance, were promoted over the heads of Indian and Pakistani veterans.”¹⁷ Any attempt at raising their issues and forming unions was met with reprisals such as the dismissal of those involved.¹⁸ It was only in 1948 and as a result of consistent complaints from Indian employees working in oil companies in Bahrain, that the issue of discrimination came to the attention of the Indian state. The Indian Government subsequently appointed its own representatives to look after the interests of nationals throughout the region.¹⁹

The massive influx of South Asian workers to the Gulf region has invited critical focus and triggered an ongoing dialogue on the migrants’ socio-cultural impact on their host communities. In this regard, Seccombe’s work on early migrants in the Gulf constitutes a rather exceptional example,²⁰ while other scholars like Errichiello have sketched out the pattern of evolution of modern international migration in the Arab Gulf States after the discovery of oil.²¹ There is a rich but largely unutilized repository of work in Malayalam that deal with the topic of movement and travel as well as the political and economic situation in the Arab Gulf region. They include articles published in popular magazines, daily news reports, and biographies and memoirs. Nonetheless, studies that adequately deal with early South Asian migrants’ various forms of historical narratives based on first person accounts of their journeys, as well as their perspectives on major events in the Gulf, are scarce.

This piece aims to fill this gap in scholarship by developing an understanding about a particular segment of the history of nation-building in the Gulf. This will be done through the testimonials and life histories of a dozen of Keralites who spent a large part of their lives in the Gulf. The present research has emerged from fieldwork conducted by the author in both the home and host (mainly United Arab Emirates and Qatar) countries between 2012 and 2016. Furthermore, personal interactions between the author and first and second- generation Malayalee expatriates belonging mainly to lower and middle classes have also informed the analysis and arguments presented here. Participants in this research were mostly in their sixties, seventies or eighties. Some had continuously lived in the Gulf countries, while others had left the region after spending thirty to forty years there. Some of the accounts have been published in regional newspapers and popular magazines in Malayalam.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ 18 (27). AWT/48 Treatment of Indian Employees in Bahrain 1948/ File No. F-18-AWT/48.

²⁰ Seccombe, “Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf,” and Seccombe and Lawless, “Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-50.”

²¹ Gennaro Errichiello, “Foreign Workforce in the Arab Gulf States (1930-1950): Migration Patterns and Nationality Clauses,” *International Migration Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 389-413.

Kerala's Gulf Connection

Malabar, the northern part of Kerala, has historically played a pivotal role in the wide network of Indian Ocean trade due to the high-value goods it possessed and exchanged.²² Recent archaeological excavations at Pattanam in South India have brought forth tangible evidence of Kerala's trade linkages with the Gulf region from the first century AD.²³ Evidence suggests that Arab traders frequently sailed back and forth between regions since that period. These journeys led to the development of diasporic communities of Arabs in various parts of Kerala, especially in Malabar, which was the hub of Arab trade in the region. The spread of Islam in the Indian Ocean region further fostered Kerala's connection with the Arab communities of the Gulf region. By the twelfth century, a system of interlinked trading networks - in which the Malabar Coast played an important role - had been established. The migration of substantial merchant communities significantly contributed to the development of trade in Malabar. This long-distance trade also necessitated the presence of on-site agents from the Gulf region to represent the interests of traders sending goods from distant locations in the port towns of Kerala.²⁴

Ibn Batuta, a fourteenth-century Arab traveller, was the first writer to give a detailed description of the settlements of Arabs from the Gulf region in various parts of Kerala.²⁵ *The Keralolpatti Chronicles* on the history of evolution of Kerala narrate an interesting story of two brothers from Muscat who were instrumental in the making of the city of Calicut in Malabar.²⁶ There are repeated references to Ceṛamān Peṛumāl, the king of Kerala, who became the first known convert to Islam from the Indian subcontinent. According to these accounts, Ceṛamān Peṛumāl travelled to Mecca and finally settled in Oman and is reported to have sent messengers to propagate the new faith along the west coast of South India.²⁷ In the middle of the nineteenth century, Sayyid Fadl, a scholar belonging to the family of Sayyids of Hadhramaut, was deported from Malabar by the British administration on the grounds of his rebellion against the colonial rule. He subsequently sailed with his family and companions to Jeddah, before eventually moving to the Dhofar province of Oman, where he became the province's governor under the Ottoman rule.²⁸ Around the same time, Mayinkutty Keyi, a trader-turned-

²² Sinnapah Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39.

²³ P. J. Cherian, *Pattanam: South India's Mohanjedaro* (Trivandrum: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2006).
²⁴ Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century*, 39.

²⁵ It is clear from the writings of Batuta that the Qadi (judge) and Khatib (orator) in many of the coastal towns were from Oman. Quoted by H.A.R Gibb, *Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa* (London: Robert M. Mc. Bride and Co., 1929), 14-16.

²⁶ Keralolpatti Chronicles cited in MGS. Narayanan, *Calicut: The City of Truth Revisited* (Calicut: University of Calicut Publications, 2006), 66.

²⁷ Stephen Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 112-120.

²⁸ Anne Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860-1925* (London: Routledge, 2003), 79-84.

scholar from Malabar had built a shelter (later known to be *Keyi Rubat*) in Mecca to provide free boarding to pilgrims from the region.²⁹

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries trade ties flourished further with the frequent trade of dates from Oman. These trade linkages brought about cultural and material commonalities and exchanges across these regions in areas such as food, agriculture, and clothing. The increased presence of Keralites in the Gulf, on the other hand, was only recorded in the middle of the twentieth century,³⁰ although there are documents proving prior migration of traders and Islamic scholars to Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Onley, in his work on Indian communities in the Gulf, cites the region's relatively hard and inhospitable climate as a possible reason for the deterrence of communities in Malabar from settling in large numbers, despite the strong trade linkages between Malabar ports and the Gulf.³¹ However, the early Gulf migrants were mainly from the century-old cosmopolitan port towns of Kerala.³² The social and religious fabric of these port towns emerged out of the exchange of people, ideas, and goods between Kerala and the Arab world.³³ Thus, the first few waves of post-oil migration followed the traditional pattern of merchants from Kerala who depended mainly on the sea-routes to reach the Gulf coasts.³⁴

The first wave was constituted by the migration of people who crossed the Arabian Sea through Bombay, Karachi and Gwadar ports in the 1940s and 50s and arrived to different parts of the Gulf without any proper travel documents.³⁵ The second wave was composed of another set of luck-seekers who set sail to the Gulf inspired by the “rags-to-rich” stories of the pioneers. This second generation mainly resorted to country crafts and *dhows*, ferrying goods between the port towns of the south western coasts of India and the Gulf.³⁶ Kasim, who moved to the UAE in the early 1960s following his uncle, narrates:

My uncle, who was one of the early migrants, left Kerala for Arabia. He spends much of his time describing the experiences he had while travelling to Dubai. He buys perfume-drenched attires and foreign confectionaries. The Smell of Gulf spread through the gifts my uncle used to bring and attracted me like nothing before... The first-generation Gulf migrants were the people who brought the culture of wearing pants to our village. We came to know from them that this

²⁹ “Mecca Resting Place to Fetch Thousands of Crores for Keyi Family of Kannur,” *The Indian Express*, 22 April 2013.

³⁰ Modern outmigration of Malayalees starts with their journey to Burma, Ceylon and Singapore in the colonial period. Later on, big cities like Bombay (known currently as Mumbai) and Calcutta in India became the prime ports of call for individual and collective migration.

³¹ James Onley, “Indian Communities in the Gulf, c. 1500-1947” in Lawrence G. Potter, ed., *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³² Two medieval ports of Kerala, Calicut and Ponnani were the two major ports of embarkation for migrants destined for Dubai and Muscat.

³³ Abbas Panakkal, “Beypūrinum Sūrinum Idayil,” *Gulf Focus* 2, no. 2 (April 2015): 28-34.

³⁴ Rahman, *Pravasiyude Yudhangal*, 2-4.

³⁵ Manu Rahman, “Löncil Pöya Kēṛaḷam,” *Chandrika Weekly* 4, no.11 (May 2012): 36.

³⁶ Rahman, *Pravasiyude Yudhangal*, 2-4.

practice was an innovation introduced by the Europeans and educated Arabs... the local[s] do not have this habit. Instead of pants, they put on knee-length gowns called kandura and abaya. Although he does not talk much, he becomes talkative when it comes to narrating the happy state of affairs in the Gulf. Dubai, according to him, was a good place for making money for those who work hard. I was further moved by his description of the Gulf in a letter he wrote to me: "... [N]ice place to stay and work, currency with high value against Indian Rupees, food in abundance, no scarcity of water, Arabs are generous. Once you are in their good book, you have a bright future in front."³⁷

Shoukkath, another early migrant belonging to the second wave narrates a similar story:

I was in Bombay working in a provision store. I used to listen to the stories of people who returned from the Gulf on vacation narrating their experience of travel by Arab dhows and the happy state of affairs in the Gulf. I admired their adventures, and of course the monetary gains they made out of migration. Inspired by such stories, I took a decision to leave Bombay for the Gulf.³⁸

The migration of 'undocumented workers' continued until the early 1970s, by which point the visa requirements and the search for "illegal migrants" in the Gulf states increased.³⁹ Moreover, the 1970s witnessed a massive exodus of Malayalees to the Gulf through legally approved means of recruitment.

Narrations of Travel

Memories and life-stories constitute the two main types of narratives used in this section. They relate to themes such as early migrants' socio-economic reasons for leaving, adventurous travel, their "new lives" in the Gulf, and their perceptions of the society and the state in their host countries. These narratives suggest that the economic development in the Gulf generated by the oil boom and the economic slump in the state of Kerala due to the crisis of agricultural economy were the major pull and push factors that fostered the migratory process in the 1950s and 60s.⁴⁰ Pressured by prevailing poverty, many in the rural areas found "illegal" migration to the Gulf countries a viable chance of finding better job prospects and a more decent life. Kunjabdulla's experience is illustrative of this opportunity:

This was in the late 1960s. The land reforms⁴¹ and the consequent distribution of our lands to the poor people made our family paupers. We struggled a

³⁷ Interview with P. K. Kazim by Manu Rahman, *Chandrika Weekly*, 26 May to 1 June 2012, 37-40.

³⁸ Interview with Shoukkath on September 12, 2014.

³⁹ Seccombe, "Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf," 3-5.

⁴⁰ Prakash, "Impact of Foreign Remittances," 3210.

⁴¹ The land reforms began in Kerala in the 1957. The Legislative Assembly in Kerala passed subsequent land reform bills in 1960, 1963, 1964, and 1969. But the historical land reform act, which put an end to the feudal system and ensured the rights of the tenants on land, came into force on 1 January 1970.

lot to [make both ends meet] and even hand to mouth existence was in trouble. Unskilled and unemployed youth from previously well-off families were very reluctant to take low-salaried jobs in Kerala. “Doing the same in the Gulf is not an issue as no one knows your identity,” my brother-in-law advised me. “With the money you earn, you can certainly retain all the fortunes you lost in the past.”⁴²

While economic reasons feature predominantly in migrants’ narratives, some also disclose other important social factors. For example, the story of Balan, an early migrant from the Ezhava-a Hindu lower caste-community, points to the caste-hierarchy in the job market in India and the inaccessibility of “decent” jobs to lower castes both in the public and private sectors as the factors that compelled him to migrate:

It was the extreme poverty in the family that led me to think of migrating to Persia⁴³ in the late 1960s. The success stories of first generation Gulf migrants by that time had inspired many to join the bandwagon. The decision to leave India was taken after many unsuccessful efforts to get a “decent” job in Bombay. The situation was very grim, only upper caste Nairs through their caste/community networks managed to get “good” jobs elsewhere in India.⁴⁴

Other accounts suggest the existence of yet another group whose decision to migrate was completely or partly independent of socio-economic compulsions. They were primarily encouraged by personal ambitions and aspirations. Based on this plurality of accounts, one can argue that the “promise of good life” may not be the sole impelling reason behind migrants’ decisions. This was particularly the case with Abdu Punnilath, who I met in a village in Kerala leading a post-retirement life after spending forty years in the UAE and Qatar. For him, it was his “longing to see new worlds and experience new cultures” that led him to set out on the journey.⁴⁵ Moreover, searching for missing siblings, relatives or friends, or accompanying a spouse were also among the major personal reasons for such journeys. Aboobacker, who reached Ajman in 1963, narrates his story of entering Dubai “illegally” with the prime intention of finding three brothers from his village:

After reaching Ajman, I initially spent quite a lot of time trying to find the three brothers from my village who had arrived there much earlier. Following an extensive search, I finally met them in Ajman. The eldest, Abdulkader, went missing from my village of South Malabar sometime in the late 1920s. He left when he was in his twenties in order to make the journey across the

⁴² Interview with P. P. Kunhabdulla who migrated to the UAE in the late 1960s and spent almost thirty years in Dubai, by Manu Rahman, *Chandirka Weekly* 4, no.11 (May 2012), 38-41.

⁴³ In Kerala the whole of the Persian Gulf was glossed as Persia.

⁴⁴ Interview with M. S. Balan by the author on 22 May 2014.

⁴⁵ Interview with Abdu Punnilath by the author held on 2 September 2014.

subcontinent. He first moved to Lahore via Bombay where he worked as a tea shop boy, a porter, and a construction worker for twenty years. He eventually landed at Mutrah Port of Muscat through Gwadar⁴⁶ at the end of 1940s. He then moved from Muscat to the Zubara region of Qatar, where the ruling al-Thani family was then based. There he became the bodyguard of one of the princes in the family. Abdulkader was physically well-built and therefore attracted the attention of sheikhs in the royal family. But his habit of smoking hashish led to his removal from his job. Once he pulled out a rifle from the armoury and fired aimlessly. Subsequently, he was thrown out of Qatar and arrived in Ajman in the mid 1950s.⁴⁷

The theme of a “better family life” as a core motivation for the migrants’ journey is evident in the accounts of Aishabi and Souda both of whom spent around thirty years in Dubai and Ajman. This “search,” however, is grounded in significantly different expectations in each account. Despite the painful experience of travel, both describe the possibility of joining their spouses and starting a new family life as a privilege that was not enjoyed by all:

My first journey to Dubai was in 1964 though my husband reached there almost ten years earlier, via Iran. He was running an electrical contracting company in Ajman since the middle of [the] 1950s. In the 1960s, UAE witnessed a massive inflow of “wives” from Kerala accompanying their husbands. This was previously a preserve of “properly recruited” highly paid Syrian Christian and Nair teachers, secretaries and managers from South Kerala who had a privileged position among the South Asian expatriates.⁴⁸

I was one of the privileged few Malayali wives who could accompany their husbands in the UAE. After serving as a civilian clerk in the Trucial Oman States Office for almost four years, my husband moved to Dubai in search of a better job. Only a miniscule few Indian husbands had kept their families with them. Among the Malayalees, only high-salaried Nairs from South Kerala and Syrian Christians from Central part were part of this club. Indian associations in the Gulf were also meant solely for such families.⁴⁹

The favouritism mentioned in the testimonies above was a prevalent practice in the recruitment of educated youth from southern parts of Kerala from the 1920s onwards by the British Indian Administration. The employment possibility, which aimed to fill administrative positions in the expanding civil service in the Gulf,⁵⁰ was confined solely

⁴⁶ Gwadar Port in the Balochistan province of Pakistan.

⁴⁷ Interviewed by the author on 18 May 2014.

⁴⁸ Interviewed by the author on 15 August 2014.

⁴⁹ Interviewed by the author on 15 August 2014.

⁵⁰ Onley, “Indian Communities in the Gulf.”

to some affluent groups in their community/caste networks. The educated upper caste Hindu Nairs and Syrian Christians from the Southern districts successfully utilised the situation when the oil-rich Middle Eastern states desperately required skilled and professional human resources in the early 1950s.⁵¹ This pattern of migration persisted for a long period as the state-owned oil companies depended on Western companies to recruit their workers from India. Private business establishments also followed suit and hired personnel from South Kerala in large numbers.⁵²

The discriminatory practices led to the increased membership of educated Muslims in Kerala in community organizations, which regularly submitted memorandums to rulers in Saudi Arabia. The most prominent example of these memoranda belonged to K. M. Moulavi, one of the pioneers of the Salafi movement in the state of Kerala in 1959. In his memorandum, Moulavi criticised the policy of recruitment of Malayalee Christians to the Holy Land as an un-Islamic practice, advising the King to address the issue. He suggested:

There is a large number of educated and skilled Salafis who are competent enough to - in their stead [Christians from Kerala] - serve the "Islamic nation." Their recruitment to the key positions in the newly established oil-companies would be helpful for a nation that has embarked on the mission of protecting Islamic Sharia from the concerted move against it by the infidels.⁵³

Although some Muslims from northern parts of Kerala participated in the early phase of migration, their participation in the process of formal recruitment was insignificant until the 1960s, when the Gulf States began requiring large-scaled semi-skilled and unskilled labour in order to cater their fast-growing oil-based economies.⁵⁴ Given the historical-religious connection they had with the Muslims of the region, Keralite Muslims soon gained an advantage over others in the 1970s.⁵⁵

With regards to "undocumented" Malayalee migrants, Khor Fakkan (presently in the UAE) became the first port of call due to the relaxed nature of its immigration laws.⁵⁶ Moreover, the local population was also receptive to the South Asian immigrants. This hospitality was partly due to the region's historical, commercial, and cultural connection with the Malabar Coast. Most local families had, at the very least, the experience of voyages to Calicut via *dhow*s.⁵⁷ The inter-regional cultural exchanges had also resulted in newly-formed familial ties as many men in Khor Fakkan had married women from Calicut.⁵⁸

⁵¹ R. E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (London, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991), 322.

⁵² Onley, "Indian Communities in the Gulf"

⁵³ K. K. Muhammed Abdul Kareem, *K.M. Moulavi: Jeevacahritram* (Kozhicode: Yuvatha Book House, 2000), 134.

⁵⁴ Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁵⁶ M. C. A Nasser, "Paṛadeṣatinte Ādimā Mudra," *Gulf Madhyamam* (Special Issue on Gulf Migration from Kerala) 3, no.1 (2012): 8-12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Omani sailors likewise married women from major port towns in Malabar, mainly Calicut, which used to be the hub of maritime trade during the medieval and early modern periods.⁵⁹ In 1976, the Omani administration began to regulate such marriages.⁶⁰

The above narratives represent individual and collective hardship arising from “illegal” migration and illustrate the nature of people’s movement in the Arabian Sea during that period. The narratives that follow offer clues to the manner in which trafficking was conducted:

My journey in the early 1960 was in an *uru*⁶¹ importing dates to Calicut. This *uru* was owned by an Arab who had marital ties with Calicut through his second wife. An agent approached me with an offer to take me to the Gulf at a cost of Rs. 400 (roughly around USD 6). I don’t remember when exactly we started and how many passengers were there in that ship. What I remember clearly is that fourteen passengers could not complete their journey as they died on the way. It took twenty-two days to reach Khor Fakkan coast. We saw throughout the journey the *srank*⁶² struggling to hide *uru* from the coast guards patrolling in the sea.⁶³

I started the journey from Bombay in a ship transporting onions to Dubai. There was a special chamber in most of the cargo and passenger ships designed for those who did not have proper documents. After nine days of troubled journey, we reached Khor Fakkan. No one was there to receive us. We entered the older part of the port town and found refuge in a nearby mosque. People doing *salah* at the mosque offered us some money which helped us survive for almost a week. We were tired and disoriented. A local Arab took us to his house, fed us and gave directions to Dubai. We travelled the entire distance on foot.⁶⁴

I set out on the journey from Bombay via a ship transporting onions to Dubai in the early 1960s. Twenty-eight people boarded that ship along with me. The scarcity of food during the journey made us open the onion sacks and eat them. We were used to sleep[ing] on those sacks despite their discomfort that troubled us a lot.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ V. D. D’ Souza, “Status Group Among the Mappila Muslims on the South-West Coast of India,” in *Social Stratification among Muslims in India* ed. Imtias Ahmed (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21-48.

⁶⁰ Shinoj K. Shamsuddin, “Calicut-Oman Marital Linkages”, *Gulf Madhyamam* 3, no.1 (2012): 66-69.

⁶¹ A country craft, Beypore in Calicut has historically been famous for building it for cargo movements in the Indian Ocean region.

⁶² The captain of the boats and country crafts.

⁶³ Alawi Haji, interviewed by the author on 26 May 2014.

⁶⁴ Interview with Balan.

⁶⁵ Interview with Kazim.

At that time, the “illegal” launches were expanding transporting an increasing number of young men from Bombay. My journey was in a smuggling vessel which unlike others was very fast. Because of my acquaintance with the people who shuttled and smuggled goods between Bombay and Dubai, I could travel for free.⁶⁶

Unlike the subsequent waves of migration, first-wave migrants had numerous stories about the narrow escapes they experienced during the journey, the risk taken to settle in, as well as their success in host countries. Remembrance of a collective misfortune features predominantly in the narrations. In particular, migrants found solace in memorising tragic travel experiences. The experience of Umar, an expatriate labourer who lived in Ras al-Khaima and Dubai, details an untoward incident. The memories of this incident were shared, albeit expressed differently, by many other migrants. However, the incident, which was significant in magnitude and alerted the sheikhdoms of the massive wave of immigration from India in “illegal” launches, has not been recorded in the documented history of migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries.

Our launch from Bombay anchored at a secret place close to Khor Fakkan. Bedouins offered us some special items along with *aleesa*,⁶⁷ dates and water. We continued our journey to Dubai, but our further movement was blocked by a Dubai Coast Guard ship. The deck of the ship was full of armed guards who were pointing their guns at us. “Hands up...bring your launch close to the ship,” the guards kept giving instructions through a loudspeaker. “Where are you from?” they asked. “We are from Bombay, this is actually a Mangalore-bound launch,” the captain of the ship, a Gujarati, told the guards. “Himar” [donkey], what followed was a set of filthy words in Arabic. Dubai police arrested some of the passengers and transferred them to their ship. The launch was tied to the ship and both cruised along the direction of the Coast Guard Ship with the same pace. To my surprise, no one got scared. Though we were being taken to the Jail, we thought the situation in [a] Dubai jail would be far better than what we had faced. But what happened was a tragedy...after half an hour cruise, the rope that tied the ship and the launch broke and the launch turned upside down within a few minutes. Rescue operations by the Coast Guard went in vain and more than thirty people were killed.⁶⁸

During my field research, I met two more people who, along with Umar, experienced a narrow escape. The first had a miraculous escape but did not wish to share his story. The second participant narrated his story somewhat differently than the one above, though the description of the “mishap” remained similar. While common threads connected the two memories, the highly-personalised manner in which they were narrated

⁶⁶ Interview with Shoukkath.

⁶⁷ A dessert popular in the Gulf and Malabar as well.

⁶⁸ Interview with C. H. Umar by Moidhu Azhiyur, *Chandrika Weekly*, 28 April to 4 May 2012, 38-41.

distinguished the accounts. Moreover, although the incident was referenced by many participants, none could remember the exact date. Juxtaposing different testimonies, however, reveals that the incident occurred around 1965.

The migrants' narratives are fragmented and contain "selective" segments of their memories. Moreover, the absence of written material and supporting archival sources renders the task of verifying and reinterpreting these accounts difficult. Nonetheless, these narratives, as forms of oral history, cover a wide range of issues that are discussed from various perspectives. As such, the forgotten or partially-remembered segments, become less significant. The narratives instead open a window into the migrants' emotions and readings of events. For example, nearly all of the narratives reveal a great deal of emotional conflict that has been associated with the departure from Kerala and the state of alienation in a foreign land:

An efficient postal system came into being in Qatar only in the late 1960s. It was only then that I could re-establish contact with friends and relatives in Kerala through letters. My parents and siblings had no news of me for a long time. Having heard many stories of drowning launches in the Arabian Sea, my parents had even reached the conclusion that I might have been killed in such a mishap. They even observed some post-death rituals for their missing son.⁶⁹

In addition to the traumatic experiences of travel, some memories also shed light on the movements of "undocumented" people transgressing the strict lines of legality in order to live and work. One can see that violations of law become the norm, and disobedience and unlawful entries are transformed into people's normal survival mechanisms in a foreign land. In practice, the host governments generally ignored such irregularities, and even at times facilitated them. The following experiences are demonstrative of this:

We landed at Sohar port after cruising almost forty-one days in a big vessel called *Kwajah Moidheen*, exporting spices from Calicut to Muscat in May 1969. Though the locals informed the Omani police about our "illegal" entry, they did not take serious note of it as it was not an unusual thing at that time. To our surprise, they did not ask much... just enquired about our further plans and greeted us, "let the desert bring luck to you." They helped us cross the border of Trucial States. We headed for Sharjah, where many friends of us lived, but set off in the desert without any clues about the direction. The luck came in the form of a truck transporting watermelons to Sharjah.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Interview with Abdul Kader Haji alias Hajikka who spent altogether 40 years in Qatar, as narrated in P. P. Kabeer, "Idankayil Korthunirthiya Oonnuvadi," *Gulf Madhyamam* 3, no. 2 (2012): 96-98.

⁷⁰ Interview with M. V. Kunhi Mohamed held on 2 August 2014.

I don't remember the exact date but it was towards the end of 1960s. We started our journey in a small launch, but on the way moved to a bigger one. When we reached the Iranian coast, the guards covered the launch from all sides and asked us to surrender. We then greeted them with *Assalam Alaikkum* to make the guards convinced that we are not pirates. Seeing our pathetic situation, the guards gave us water and dates and warned us of piracy-prone areas ahead.⁷¹

Despite their unofficial and haphazard status, most of these journeys did not attract any unfriendly or intolerant reactions by the host states. Their movements never posed any real threat to the state. Sometimes, the receiving states even encouraged such human exchange as a way to compensate the lack of human resources available to work in their booming oil economies.

Alternative Accounts of Nations' Past

The second set of narratives contain accounts of early migrants who had no role in the social and political process in the host countries, but, as silent spectators, were witnesses to nation-building processes in countries like the UAE and Qatar. There is a convergence of histories, myths, and realities in the retelling of the past. These narratives succinctly illustrate some of the complex events that the societies of the Gulf states have experienced. However, the freedom of the migrant population to share their experiences is restricted by various sorts of political sensibilities. Shoukkath's testimonial, for instance, demonstrates a deep transformation affecting the relation between the rulers and ruled in the Sheikhdom of Ajman. His experience is illustrative of how the symbolic languages of family, clan, and religious ideology, which the rulers used to gain legitimacy and support, were replaced by modern means.

Sheikh Rashid,⁷² the then ruler of Ajman, was our regular customer. He came to my Indian restaurant with his children, friends and a battalion of Bedouin bodyguards. He was very fond of Mughal food which he ordered for special parties thrown at the palace. The delicious food served at my restaurant brought me close to the ruler. He became the *kafeel* (sponsor) of a chain of supermarkets which I started later. He also supported my endeavour to spread the chain to neighbouring towns, provided me with all the facilities to start one in Manama⁷³ and deployed two cops to control the mad rush of the locals inside. The security arrangements were done mainly for handling poor people hailing from remote villages. For them my shop offered a new experience of shopping. Whenever I was in need of money, he discouraged me to approach the bank. I loaned huge amounts from him. He maintained a strong dislike towards bank interests as it was un-Islamic. Sheikh Rashid continued to follow

⁷¹ Interview with Abdul Kader Haji.

⁷² Sheikh Rashid ibn Humaid Al-Nuaimi, who ruled Ajman from 1928 to 1981.

⁷³ One of the districts in Ajman.

a very down to earth life until his death in 1981. My establishments enjoyed immunity from *kafalat*.⁷⁴ But this was not the case with his sons, who were Western-educated. Though I had taken care of them as kids, my access to them was limited and I felt complete alienation after Sheikh Rashid's death.⁷⁵

Memories of people who were close to the ruling families in some of the Sheikhdoms in the UAE bear testimony to the minute sociological changes to state affairs based on kinship, family ties, and other forms of personalised relations. One can also find references to the rulers' attempts to transform the traditional political structure around the theme of a "modern state" in these narrations. All of the early migrants interviewed mentioned the changes in socialisation that transpired between the ruling families and local population during the 1970s. The experiences of Alawi Haji and Mohammed reaffirm Shoukkath's depiction of the transition from "traditional" to "modern:"

Towards the beginning of 1965, I entered business in Dubai where I faced fierce competition from Sindhis and Iranians. They owned most of the department stores while *wakala*⁷⁶ shops and cafeterias were run by Malayalees. I could manage the business with my little knowledge of Urdu, which was widely used by Sindhi Bhatias and Pakistanis. Because of their historical affinity with Malabar, Arabs were very friendly. Shiekh Rashid⁷⁷ used to come to Diera market where my shop was situated. It was not for the purpose of shopping. Rather he roamed around mingling closely with the shopkeepers. He behaved like an ordinary person, paying visit to the restaurants owned by Indian expatriates for [the purpose of] tasting Indian food. He used to share his experience of visiting Bombay in the 1940s. But that became a rare scene in the 1970s.⁷⁸

In Fujairah (in late 1960s) no one from our group had proper occupation. Most of us lived in tents or portable cabins. Even though most of the people in our group were "undocumented workers," Arabs treated us nicely and gave us petty jobs for survival. We had regular interactions with the Fujairah Sheikh.⁷⁹ Regardless of our status, he mingled with all foreign labourers in Fujairah at that time. But the situation changed all of a sudden after the establishment of the UAE.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Sponsorship money.

⁷⁵ Interview with Shoukkath.

⁷⁶ Petty off-license shops.

⁷⁷ Sheikh Rashid ibn Said Al-Maktoum, the former ruler of Dubai (1958-1990).

⁷⁸ Interview with Alawi Haji.

⁷⁹ Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad al Sharqi who ruled Fujairah from 1942-75.

⁸⁰ Interview with Mohammed, who lived in Fujairah and Dubai for almost two decades, by the author on 13 May 2014.

The difficulties faced by migrants while attempting to adjust to the local conditions are reflective of the transition of the Arab Gulf countries from traditional to modern states. Some narratives specifically offer accounts of the changing nature of governance with the introduction of elaborate bureaucracies, policing strategies, and mechanisms of immigration control.

The scholarship on the post-colonial nation-building process in the Arab Gulf states generally focuses on local or European elites. Little attention has been paid to the experience of expatriate workers. In fact, mainstream literature seeks to negate their agency by emphasising their inability to initiate any action independent of the locals and denying their contribution to the social and political changes that transformed their host societies. In this context, individual and collective memories cannot be considered inert and passive, but as bearers of great potential to provide alternative historical narratives. Some accounts demonstrate the creation of a complex state with multifarious government apparatuses as the combined result of an increase in oil revenues and efforts by ruling families to consolidate their power. Mohammed's experience points to the rulers' attempts to regulate migrations by making borders non-porous. Hamza's narrative, who was affiliated with the first group of "officially" recruited "educated" workers in the Gulf, sketches out the changing nature of the region's employment sector:

Towards the end of 1960s, I moved from Khor Fakkan to Fujairah. By then, the movements of undocumented labourers had become very difficult. There was police patrolling and many of my friends were detained. Many of those who did not have documents were deported to Dubai, where the rules were far more liberal. The immigration department started taking stringent actions against those who arrived in launches from India. By then the "illegal" migration from India had also come to a halt.⁸¹

I was among the first batch of migrants from northern Kerala recruited through the official channel. I joined the Dubai National Air Transport Association in 1968 and personally witnessed the growth of Dubai Airport. The rapid development of Dubai happened in the next ten to fifteen years. This change was slightly reflected in the attitude of the locals. Their spending pattern changed drastically. In government offices and public-sector companies, first generation local Arabs were replaced by the western-educated youngsters. However, top level positions in many sectors like airlines were still composed of Europeans.⁸²

The feeling of social and cultural alienation was equally shared by the early migrants from various backgrounds. For them, the fear of loss of identity created a profound sense of insecurity and a sharpened awareness of marginality. In this context, the formation and membership in informal associations offered them a sense of political identity and

⁸¹ Interview with Mohammed.

⁸² Interview with Hamsa Valiyakath by the author on 22 August 2014.

compensated the lack of opportunity for participation in the national politics of their host countries. Balan's memories shed light on the social life of migrants from Kerala who constituted a small minority. These migrants, who arrived in the Gulf states at very low rates before the 1970s, formed informal associations, but faced difficulty in expressing themselves openly:

Malayalees who lived with me were mostly from poor backgrounds but were politically active. We all were communists but feared the consequence of expressing it openly. We worked clandestinely among the Malayalee migrants. In weekly secret gatherings, we shared political news reaching the Gulf through regular letters of friends from Kerala. Given the subtle and secret mode of our operation and our limited reach, our politics did not find any resonance among the nationals. This situation continued until the 1970s, when we launched a cultural organization remotely affiliated to the Communist Party in Kerala.⁸³

The perceptions of early migrants are generally marked by a sense of alienation, which is deeply rooted in their relationships with the locals. Migrants' narratives invariably touch upon questions of group identity, alienation, and a sense of powerlessness in a foreign land. This sense of alienation ultimately resulted in the formation of an "imagined nation" that was manifested through informal associations of Malayalee labourers that offered the possibility of escaping the political realities of the host country. Alawi Haji shares a detailed account of such informal associational life in the Gulf:

In Sharjah, we, a big battalion of Malayalees, lived together in special types of houses called *murabba*.⁸⁴ Within two or three years, the place I stayed in became a strong Malayalee bastion with a massive inflow of people from Malabar coming by *urus* that transported coir and fish oil from Calicut. We met each other every evening and talking about Kerala politics was our major pastime. Only in the 1970s Indian associations came into being. Before that there was a weekly informal gathering for people from Kerala. Small restaurants and cafeterias owned by Malayalees were the venues of such meetings. Reading letters aloud and sharing news from the villages in Kerala was a much-valued activity.⁸⁵

While some narratives are primarily concerned with individual experiences of difficulties or personal career success stories, they nonetheless entail clues to the wider socio-economic context.

Another set of narratives attempts to reconstruct the experience of accommodation in the host societies by highlighting survival strategies. They map individual and collective experiences of exclusion from various sorts of spatial, economic, social, and

⁸³ Interview with Balan.

⁸⁴ Small thatched huts.

⁸⁵ Interview with Alawi Haji.

political spheres. Emerging themes in such narratives include spatial segregation, living patterns, sharing of spaces, which sometimes led to petty quarrels, as well as intensified forms of sociability created by spatial segregation. The narratives of Balan, Alawi Haji, and Kazim expose a plethora of issues, ranging from the various types of hierarchies that existed in the employment sector to spatial segregation:

My first job in Dubai was of a baby sitter with a British family. The salary was around Dhs. 100. As I gained further experience in this field, I was able to earn [an] increasingly large and regular salary. We (Indian and Pakistani expatriate labourers) stayed in tents, while Englishmen and elite Arabs lived in independent villas. Among the Malayalees, those who were employed in Sheikhly palaces were the most affluent ones. Though as tea boys, cooks and house drivers they still constituted the lower strata of the hierarchy. They nonetheless enjoyed a special position because of their “sheikhly” connections.⁸⁶

Most of my friends were in their twenties and engaged in stevedoring work at the Sharjah port. Previous experience gained in Calicut helped many Mappila *khalasi*⁸⁷ outshine other nationalities in their profession, especially Pakistanis who were physically well-built. I got the job of cook for an Englishman which was the most prestigious and much sought-after job a Malayalee could ever dream of. My first salary was around Rs.100 (around USD 1.5). The salary of a higher government official in Kerala at that time was less than Rs. 80 (just above USD 1). The late 1960s witnessed the arrival of educated and skilled migrants from India. Relatively high salary was the major pull factor.⁸⁸

We, labourers from various parts of India and Pakistan stayed in *chopadas*.⁸⁹ Floors were barren and 10-15 people slept together in a long row on mats of grass, which sometimes led to irritation and petty quarrels. I eventually moved to Dubai where I survived the first five years without any documents. The destination of the majority of unskilled labourers from Malabar in Dubai was small restaurants and cafeterias where people used to work and live.⁹⁰

The testimonials of Aishabi, Abdul Rahiman and Dastagir narrated below reflect an attempt to interpret the process of nation-building in the Gulf countries in an alternative way by early South Asian migrants. Although they are inspired by their own personal experiences, they function as vehicles to convey an understanding of the Gulf's past as experienced - individually or collectively - by the South Asian

⁸⁶ Interview with Balan.

⁸⁷ This term refers to Muslim dockyard workers and lascars working at ports and dockyards in Malabar.

⁸⁸ Interview with Alawi Haji.

⁸⁹ Small makeshift houses built mainly of metal or plastic sheets.

⁹⁰ Interview with Kazim.

expatriates. These narratives may not follow any chronological orders or consistent geographical locations. Furthermore, they may be partial and even contradictory. In some occasions, an event has more than one version. However, the narratives voice the experiences of groups that have been excluded from political power and dominant social discourses. They therefore revive the sense of agency of “subalterns” by stressing their “crucial” contributions to the dynamics of historical change as spectators, witnesses, or victims.

My first journey to Ajman was in 1964 though my husband reached the Gulf almost ten years before me via Iran. He was running an electrical contracting company in Ajman since the middle of 1950s that was supposed to be the first one in the emirate. He slowly spread the business to Sharjah and Dubai. With extensive supports from the then rulers of three emirates, Ajman, Sharjah and Dubai, he started many innovative ventures including starting a cinema in Dubai and a star hotel in Ajman. Although he initially started with Hindi movies, he slowly turned to screening South Indian films in the middle of 1960s. These films were usually in Malayalam language but with Arabic or Hindi subtitles in order to attract cinema-goers cutting across the regional lines. The royal family had generously promoted his business projects by providing local sponsorship, land, and other incentives. Simultaneous to that, he was also engaged in construction and real estate fields which were really in their teething stage in the UAE. The ruler of Sharjah was the *kafeel* (local sponsor) for most of his endeavours. I remember my husband had played an important role introducing modern modes of entrepreneurship among the locals and the immigrants alike.⁹¹

When I reached Fujairah in the early 1970s, that place was a humble fishing coast, totally cut off from modernity. Modern technologies were still to be used in fishing. With experiences acquired from Kerala, I introduced to them new techniques of fishing. Initially, my innovations were not taken seriously by the locals. They even called me *majnun* or mad. But appreciations started pouring in once the techniques proved successful. Many emulated these techniques. The locals even gave me the title of *muwatan* or national as a mark of honour. With this conferred *watani* status, officials at the immigration advised me to apply for naturalization but my sentimental ties with Kerala prevented me from doing so.⁹²

My father reached Doha in a cargo ship from Bombay in 1948. After trying his luck in various fields, he started a tea shop called *Bismillah* in Suq Vafiq, which

⁹¹ Interview with Aishabi.

⁹² As narrated in A. Rasheedudiin, “Avoli Vetta,” *Gulf Madhyaman* 3, no. 2 (2012): 86-88.

was then a petty market lying close to the port without much crowd, shops or big buildings. His experience of running a tea shop in Bombay helped setting up a similar one in Doha. The initial success in the endeavour tempted him to start a hotel in 1954. That was supposed to be the first hotel in Doha and one of the few double-storied buildings in the country. He enjoyed the generous support of two members of the royal family in this venture. British administration also helped him by giving permission to recruit personnel from various South Asian countries. Our hotel was a new experience for many in the country. It became a major landmark in Doha and emerged as a prominent socializing space for people from India, Pakistan, and Iran.⁹³

Conclusion

The narratives analysed in this piece are not mere reinventions of the past. The memories and life stories of migrant workers, a group who has left no written records of their experiences, reveal a segment in the history of the Gulf states, which has been buried by grand national narratives. They succinctly illustrate how South Asian labourers in the Gulf can produce diverse descriptions and explanations for the same historical episodes discussed in “standard” history texts, as well as expose others that are altogether absent from existing historiographies.

By offering an alternative to the formally recorded histories, migrants’ narratives fall under the category of “histories from below,” with the intertwining of historical events with “subaltern” renderings. Early migrants are aware of their limitations as expatriate workers with only a distinct domain in which to live and operate. Barring certain exceptions, the dilemmas of early migrants reflect their wish to be socially, but not politically, integrated into the “new nations” that emerged in the Gulf. Their discourse, therefore, is visibly marked by selective appropriations, in which they have a partial and fragmentary relationship with the host “nation.”

The post-oil migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries has created a plethora of narratives, which in most cases, cannot be assessed by the parameters set by “standard history.” The traditional histories of the region, based mainly on colonial records, show a tendency to omit such memories generated by the expatriates. Because these memories fall outside the boundaries of the nation-state, they tend to be either omitted or accommodated within the national histories of the Gulf countries. However, these narratives are very significant for their attempt to re-conceptualise the history of the Gulf, which has previously been told exclusively through the lens of elite actors within specific territorial units.

⁹³ Life history of Konganamveettil Hamza as narrated by his son, Dastagir, in Raees. K., “Malayali Hotel in Qatar History,” *Gulf Focus* 2, no. 14 (February, 2015): 10-15.