

Workers Dying in Qatar

Jayati Ghosh

The grim news coming out of Qatar about the deaths of [hundreds of migrant workers](#) from India and other (mostly South Asian) countries provides an insight into the appalling lack of concern for human life among employers there. The problem seems especially bad in the construction industry, as companies try to finish sites for the next World Cup at breakneck speed. It underlines the double standards with respect to local and migrant workers, as well as the divisions among the migrants themselves, between expatriates from rich countries and those employed in the dirty, difficult and dangerous activities that locals no longer wish to perform.

But the deaths offer an insight into the depressing reality of workers' conditions in South Asia too. To start with, this dreadful situation did not come to light because the government of India was so shocked by the information that it protested and lodged a formal complaint. Far from it: Indians know about it largely because a news agency filed a request under the country's [Right to Information Act](#), forcing the embassy in Qatar to reveal how many Indian citizens had died in the past two years.

It turns out that every month, on average, [20 Indian workers died](#), and in some months nearly 30. But we do not know how many others suffered injuries that have affected their lives and ability to work. We do not know what the Indian Embassy – or indeed the Government of India – did to express its concern about this over the past two years when they must have known about these deaths.

This apparent apathy and even nonchalance fits in only too well with the overall approach of the Indian elite towards the mass of its workers, migrant or otherwise. The Indian growth story has been marked by very little employment generation. Despite nearly three decades of rapid growth, net formal employment (jobs that provide any sort of worker protection and are subject to labour laws) has not increased at all.

According to official [National Sample Survey data](#), around 95% of all Indian workers are stuck in informal activities, in precarious and often exploitative and low-paying contracts. More than half of these are “self-employed”, which means that they are responsible for their own safety and usually determine their own exploitation out of sheer desperation.

The lack of adequate regulation to ensure workers' rights has been part of a strategy that sees economic growth as worth almost any cost and maintains that private investors must be provided all sorts of incentives to allow them to deliver such growth. Any kind of worker protection is seen as something that shackles both investment and growth and thereby inhibits potential wealth creation. This strategy delivered growth (but without creating good jobs) for a while; now even that growth is running out of steam.

Pressure from below has led to some policies designed to improve working people's lives, but only to a very limited extent. The rural employment guarantee programme, for example, has operated to stabilise wages, especially for female workers. But even that has been run down by the government in the past few years, with spending on the programme falling in most states. The only “dynamic” private activity that has generated more jobs in the past decade has been construction. However, most construction in India is marked by a similar lack of concern for minimal standards of worker safety and other basic protections as in

Qatar. Indeed, we don't know how many workers die or are injured while working on sites in India itself, because such data are only haphazardly collected.

Given this context, it is no wonder that the push factors for migration remain so strong. For a while lack of opportunities at home was not enough to drive worker movement because so much of this kind of migration remains demand-driven. But there has been a post-recession revival of building work in several Gulf states, and it is particularly evident in Qatar, led by mega-construction for the World Cup. When the sheer pace of construction combines with a desperation on the part of workers willing to make huge sacrifices to improve the living conditions of their families, the result is a massive potential for exploitation.

Migrant workers contribute hugely to the Indian economy, helping to stabilise the balance of payments through their remittances. Yet Indian public policy towards migrants remains woefully lacking, being biased in terms of class and gender. Recognising the rights of migrant workers in Qatar is obviously crucial; but it is just as necessary to recognise the rights of workers in India and reduce the incentive to migrate in the first place.

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