

Distress and Displacement in Times of War*

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Recruitment drives held over the last week of January, in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh and Rohtak in Haryana, for Indian workers to undertake construction and caregiver jobs in Israel have captured global attention. Thousands of job aspirants, who had either registered online or just walked in for interviews, were seen as vying for 10,000 advertised positions to be filled in each of these locations. Promised a salary in excess of Rs. 1,30,000 a month plus perks varying from a small bonus to free accommodation, the applicants are willing to ignore the risks associated with migrating to a country engaged in a war that is nowhere near end. They seem eager to win a job in Israel, despite the dangers involved in relocating to a country that has, through its genocidal attack on the Gaza strip, put civilians in its own country and in the region at risk. Interestingly, the government of India, which in a departure from past caution has strengthened its relations with the Israeli government, is facilitating the recruitment drive led by the Israel's Population, Immigration and Border Authority, through the National Skill Development Corporation, a not-for-profit company in which the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship holds a 49 per cent stake. In fact, banners at recruitment sites carry pictures of the Prime Minister along with those of local leaders, making it appear that this is employment that the Indian leadership has organised through its efforts.

The sudden demand for workers from Israel is the fallout of an Israeli government decision to suspend the work permits of thousands of Palestinians. The suspension was only partly the result of the fear that these workers may join the fight against the Israeli occupation of their lands. It is also reflective of a longer run strategy of depriving Palestinians the right to live in the occupied territories and driving them out of the land that still belongs to them. Well before the Hamas attack of October 2023 that Israel uses to justify its all-out war in Gaza and intensified aggression in the West Bank, Eli Cohen and S. Jaishankar, the foreign ministers of Israel and India, had signed an agreement to facilitate the migration of 42,000 workers from India to Israel for construction work. The plan to use Indian workers as substitutes for Palestinians does seem to have a longer history.

This context makes the rush for jobs in Israel exceptional. Indian workers seeking temporary employment abroad is not new for India. Large scale temporary migration to foreign locations over a short period attracted attention when the boom that followed the oil shocks of the 1970s, set off migration trail of workers—masons, carpenters, drivers, nurses, managerial staff and professionals—to the West Asian countries. Indians, as well as migrants from a few other less developed countries, were willing to take on jobs that citizens in these countries kept away from. That suited the host countries seeking to accelerate development. It also suited interested Indians. Employment was hard to come by in India, and wages and salaries offered to the migrants were well above what they could hope for at home. With frugal living abroad, they could in most cases save enough to care for families left behind as well as invest in housing and post retirement living. So long as unemployment and underemployment were high and conditions of work short of expectations, such migration was inevitable.

In addition, there were external spinoffs from such large-scale temporary migration. Besides marginally reducing stress in labour markets, the remittances from these workers was a boon for the country, with India emerging as the largest recipient of remittances among labour exporting countries. Access to that foreign exchange has been crucial for India's balance of payments. Thus, combined with the case for the freedom that workers must necessarily have to choose their type and location of work, labour migration appeared to be and was considered a gain for India.

However, the new push to Israel is not as benign in its implications. There is of course the ethical issue, raised by leading trade unions, arising from taking the jobs released by the forceful displacement of Palestinians by a state engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocidal war. Even if that is not an issue that bothers those desperately seeking a source of livelihood, it should matter to the Indian government. It clearly does not.

But there is also the danger associated with choosing to work in a country where war has made living difficult and put life itself at risk. A factor countering such fears is the government's endorsement and facilitation of the drive, and statements that it has assurances that the workers would be safe. A guarantee from the sovereign is the best assurance one can get in these uncertain and violent times. But the more important factor, flagged by job aspirants interviewed by the news media, is the desperate job situation in the country. Though a new set of official surveys suggests that the number of those employed has risen in recent years, there is enough reason to be sceptical. It is known that bizarre and misguided measures adopted by the NDA government, such as demonetisation and the GST regime, as well as the fallout of the Covid pandemic and the response to it had damaging effects on employment in a number of sectors. It had especially severe adverse effects on the informal sector where those without access to decent employment took refuge. Even to the extent that new employment is available, the jobs are not regular, provide no social security or paid leave and offer very low wages. Not surprisingly, there is huge demand for onerous employment offered at low wages through the NREGA. So much so that the government is seeking ways of keeping down the number of jobs provided through the scheme in order to reduce outlays in the budget. The most recent such attempt is the decision to link wage payments to Aadhar credentials, that has led to the exclusion of a large number of those with job cards seeking employment.

It is this employment crisis that is pushing workers to take on any kind of work, even if there are risks to life and limb associated with it. It is for the government to dissuade workers from making that choice, more so because of the support such employment implicitly provides to the Israeli government's policy of exclusion and ethnic cleansing. Instead, having miserably failed to meet its promise to deliver 2 crore new jobs every year, the government is choosing to exploit the opportunity afforded by the policies of a settler-colonial state to present itself as beneficial employment provider.

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