The language barrier system fosters. Just as nationals system on migrants: (Gardner 2010). Each system has produced a significant number of protection from the legal framework of the country. By classifying migrants or sponsor, is usually the migrant’s employer (Ali 2010). Migrant workers must operate through contracts. This system situates migrant workers as temporary or “guest” workers of Gulf countries for 2 to 3 years at a time, which constitutes an environment of temporality and impermanence for the laborers (Vora 2013). Nationals must comprise a majority of company ownership (Ali 2010). The kafala system is only partially coded in law. The migrant is connected to his or her kafeel, not to the state (Gardner 2010).

The oil boom in the 1950s and 60s initiated an era of development and modernization in the Gulf, which placed a high demand on labor (Gardner 2010). Because of relatively small population sizes, GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. Though it has allowed GCC States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmetically, the state has significantly byproducts that have significantly altered the texture of Gulf society.

The kafala system promotes the rapid influx of migrants to meet the labor demand while simultaneously subsiding this imported population through its tax regulations and exclusion from the legal framework in Gulf States. As a result, the Gulf has witnessed an emergence of multi-tiered societies where locals are situated in the top tier and migrant populations consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society. The kafala system has produced structural inequalities in Gulf States and has resulted in grave human rights abuses against migrant laborers.

Today, the effects of the kafala system are visible in every aspect of Gulf society. The spatial layout of Gulf cities speaks to the social dynamic that the kafala system fosters. Just as nationals live and exist in the heart of the city, they are central to the benefits of the kafala system. Migrant labor populations typically live on the periphery of Gulf cities, which mirrors their marginalized role in society. Dubai is a city of dualities and divides, and is home to many of the features of the kafala system. Dubai is known for its luxury and extravagance, but you do not have to travel far to find contrasting lifestyles. When one thinks of expatriates, there is a common image of Westerners seeking tax-free work. The reality is that the majority of expatriates are Arab immigrants and, in greater numbers, migrant workers from South Asia and the Indian subcontinent. They provide the backbone of society and labor to provide the Gulf with its iconic infrastructure.

Dubai is a city of dualities and divides, and is home to many political, social, and spatial boundaries and dichotomies. All of the legal and social mechanisms discussed in the previous sections have played out in a way that has created rigid boundaries between different social classes, races, nationalities, and religions. These divisions between various populations in Dubai are perpetuated by the government through rigid distinctions between citizens and residents; national and non-nationals; locals and expatriates, as well as temporary workers from South Asia and Western migrants. These distinctions used in political discourse trickle down every level of society. Because the government makes distinctions between different nationalities and legal statuses, the citizenry follows suit and uses these same distinctions in commercial enterprise, in the media, and in daily life. This dynamic of exclusivity and separation in Dubai is then trickled down to the migrants themselves, perpetuating feelings of inferiority, unimportance, and exclusion.

The discovery of oil is often seen as the distinct catalyst that carried Dubai from its mercantilist history to its new role as a global player in the realm of tourism, finance, and real estate. However, the lived experiences during periods of rapid transformation are often left out of narratives of Gulf societies. Though the discovery of oil certainly played an important role in the rapid transformation of Dubai from a regional port city to a globally important trading center, the role that various sub-groups and migrant populations played in this transformation are integral to Dubai’s iconic presence in contemporary landscapes.

References


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